

喬林 知

Tomo Takabayashi Presents

宝はアワツ
土の中!



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宝はマジック 土の中!

lang="en">

Kyou Kara Maou - Volume 12

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Novel Illustrations

Prologue



Ah~~ My little brother, I cry for you.

Thou shalt not die^[1]... No, I'm not like our old man, I'm not the type of pacifist that would rather nothing happens.

When I take over as governor, I'll abolish progressive taxes that change according to your earnings, and hold the New World Expo R^[2], even if I won't get the Akutagawa Prize or the Naoki Prize. The script for "New Soap Bubble Holiday HG"^[3] must also always be rewritten.

But now isn't the time to think about how I'm going to handle politics ten years later, because the brother who's every bit important as my reputation has actually gone missing in an alternate world! Upon closer interrogation, I found out that that's a scary place where skeletons fly in the sky and have their own

consciousness! How can I possibly leave precious Yuu-chan in that Skeleton Island... No, that scary world!

Come to think of it, growing up, rescuing my little brother has always been my duty. I still remember that time when we were young, Yuu-chan forgot to put down the toilet seat before sitting down. While he was stuck and bawling his eyes out, the one to save him wasn't Mom or Dad, but me! Right now, my baby brother must be in a foreign land, crying out in fear, "Nii-chan—Nii-chan--!"

Wait for me, Yuu-chan! Nii-chan will definitely save you! I'll cross the Niagara Falls, now, your big brother wants to Be with You^[4].

References

1. ↑ A controversial wartime poem by Yosano Akiko addressed to her younger brother, expressing anti-war sentiments.
2. ↑ The governor of Tokyo decided to cancel the World Expo in 1995.
3. ↑ A game show that aired from 1961 to 1972 every Sunday from 6pm to 7pm.
4. ↑ Hey, this is pretty recent! A 2004 movie, literally, 'Now, I want to see you'. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Be_with_You_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Be_with_You_(film)))

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

宝はマヌケ
土の中!



Note: Words in full caps were originally in English. Sorry to make them sound like they're yelling all the time orz.

“And I thought this big brother here is just a bodyguard...”

The woman called Hazel Graces is narrowing her hazel eyes, just like her name.

“...How unexpected, why would you call me using that name?”

She shakes her filthy white hair, throwing dry fuel into the roaring flames.

Judging from the emanating stench, that should be some sort of animal droppings, but it's best not to confirm anything.

"What on earth are you people? I just heard that a king came from a faraway mazoku country, who'd have thought that people like you who seem to be the Maou and his party look so normal, and can speak a language that doesn't exist in this world. Even more unexpected is that one of the bodyguards actually knows the name I rarely use!"

A language that doesn't exist?

I instinctively move my hand to my throat, asking no one in particular, "...Just now, what language was I speaking..."

The old lady scrutinizes Conrad and me with a look of disbelief.

"It's English, you know. It's all because I accidentally said 'COMEON. Your English is very authentic, just that you have a unique pronunciation, so I can't place your accent. I think it sounds a lot like Boston or Trenton, but it's also a lot like a strange rabbit with a watch, huh."

"You said English!? How can that be! Old lady... No, sorry, MISS... No, it's MiSS Venera, right? I know I CAN'T SPEAK ENGLISH!"

Crap, the more conscious I am, the more I'll see the stiff English from the textbooks. Because my junior high English teacher couldn't speak English, so if I can speak fluent English, then that would really be a miracle. For all you know I could even say 'This IS APPLE' and not be aware of it.

The old lady puts her wrinkly hands on her hips, and brushes away our confusion with a hearty laugh.

"What a polite young man, didn't I say this before? There's no need to be so courteous. No matter how tough I am, I was already over sixty years old when I came to this country, if I still look like a young lady, then that'd be too weird."

From the way she's talking she shouldn't be a shinzoku born on this land, but someone who came over here from elsewhere. Judging from the color of her eyes, it is rather hard to say she's a local shinzoku.

"But little buddy, you sure have an interesting way of talking! Mixing a

toddler's stiff single words, and the everyday talk of young people, it's just like listening to Mother Goose and a soap opera at the same time!"

"Actually the things you're saying are equally intriguing."

The previously silent Lord Weller finally speaks up, his voice unexpectedly solemn.

"Bodyguards, Mother Goose, soap operas, these are all words this place doesn't have. Hazel, I know where you're from. But I hope you can tell me, how you got to be here."

"The person who asked first was me, you know!"

She raises her chin slightly, looking down at Conrad. Underneath the firelight her red-brown eyes sparkle behind the completely whitened fringe. Although she's petite, her solemn tone emanates the aura of a challenge.

"So I am Hazel Graves, sure, but I never used that name in Seisakoku. Because slaves don't have names. But how would you foreign visitors know it? Even if Yelshi sent you guys to lure me out, you shouldn't know, right?"

The fire lightens up the little hut, the bracken diminishing as it burns and bursts apart, sparks and crackles leaping in unison.

"Who the hell are you guys? You shouldn't just be this little buddy's guards, right?"

"Don't simply point at him!"

When Hazel points at me with her pointer finger, the previously wordless Josak suddenly says this short and simple line. Although he's speaking in the common language that's unknown in Seisakoku, we can still hear the threat in his tone. She immediately puts her hand down, and stares at Josak, who's making himself very clearly heard.

"I don't know what relationship you have with Lord Weller, but I can't tolerate a slave being so rude to our Majesty!"

"Josak! This person saved us. Don't make it sound so bad!"

The unhappy spy explains to me, who's scolding him,

"But it's not like I'm wrong, Young Master. Even if she helped us escape, she's still just an old lady who pulls the manure cart, y'know. Even if you don't want her to kneel down and lick your feet, isn't it too rude of her to point at Your Majesty with her finger?"

A bit of Gurrier's personality comes through in those words.

Hazel Graves, on the other hand, smiles rather interestedly and talks with Lord Weller, with whom she can communicate. Looks she can tell from Josak's attitude alone that he's mad.

"He's mad now, huh."

"He's angry because his master was insulted. Although His Majesty is an open-minded monarch, and doesn't harp on status, but to a minister who's sworn loyalty to the king, it's another matter altogether."

Listening to this spine-tickling explanation, I feel so awkward I don't even know where to direct my gaze. When I look at the line where the rotting wooden walls meet the ceiling, Hazel uses a tone completely different from before to say,

"Little buddy, so you really are His Majesty the Maou, then? Even if you're dressed like peasants, you really are the bona fide Shin Makoku emissary? Crap, then it looks like I can't call you little buddy anymore."

She suddenly falls to one knee, holding up my right hand like a knight.

"Your Majesty."

"Waa! W-wait a sec!"

Seeing the way she respectfully bows to me, I hastily crouch down with her. The two of us are like young girls in prayer.

"Please forgive my previous rudeness."

"Didn't I say this before--- you acting like this makes me feel awkward! I'm the worst at dealing with this sort of thing—it's up to you if you want to call me Your Majesty or Dai Maou or simply Yuuri, but I'm begging you, don't act all careful around me like you're touching a bump where you hit yourself!"

Hazel curves the corners of her mouth lightly, smiling in a fearless way that's completely unlike an old lady. She changes to shaking my hand, gripping my right

hand forcefully as she says,

“Please take care of me, Your Majesty. After hiding in the graves for so long, it’s my first time meeting a current king, heh.”

“Hiding in the graves... Grandma Hazel, are you a grave robber?”

“If I really was a grave robber, I’d want to leave more valuables for my descendants!”

She tsks her tongue with a look of regret, and then covers her mouth jokingly. Slowly she stands up, asking me what these two young men’s names are.

“So you’re Lord Weller and Gurrier. How exciting, I haven’t known any man with a name for a long time. But in the middle of your discussions, there seems to have been some conflicts. Even if you can’t save yourselves, there will be helpers appearing in the unlikeliest places. Seems like you were set up by Yelshi... the Emperor, it’s not wrong for me to assume that?”

“NO!”

The “NO” I yell is surprisingly loud, taking even me by surprise. Turn my head to the side, thinking back to the young emperor of Seiakoku sitting on the throne, and the older twin brother leaning on him. Although it only happened a few hours ago, but just thinking about it, gives my brain an intense feeling of numbness.

“We weren’t set up by Yelshi. I... We were fooled by Saralegui... that is, Yelshi’s older brother, Saralegui. Who’d have thought they were brothers.”

I never thought that Saralegui, who was so friendly to me, was lying to me from the start.

“I took half a year to realize that most shinzoku are twins, too. Such as, ‘why did the guy I just saw appear here, maybe he’s a master sprinter’. Besides, no one could have guessed, that the king of Shou Shimaron and the Emperor here would be twins!

Hazel nods in sympathy, continuing to ask,

“But why would the Maou’s party only bring so few people all the way to Seisakoku? Could I have gotten it wrong? I heard that the people at Dejima and

the palace are almost all Shou Shimaron men, and there are only two, three mazoku who disembarked.”

“Before discussing that, please verify your identity.”

Lord Weller suddenly interrupts our conversation. He’s right, it’s great to have someone who can think calmly by my side.

“I have countless questions regarding Hazel Graves. But since you have another name, then we also have a lot of questions to ask ‘Venera’.”

“That’s right, Venera, Miss Venera! This Mrs... Mn—Ma’am, since you’re Venera, that means the one we’re looking for is you. Please tell me, do you know two girls called Jason and Freddy? Where are they now? I received the letter they wrote to me.”

Logically they should have returned to the hometown they left when they were young, and have missed dearly, living their days happily in Seisakoku. But from the contents of the letter I received, there isn’t a single word with anything to do with ‘happy’. Instead, after needless suffering, the only words we can understand are these—

Venera, hope, save.

“Please tell me, what kind of situation am I supposed to save you from? What’s happened to those children!? Grandma Hazel please tell me, since you call yourself Venera...”

Just as I grab Hazel’s arm, there are barks in the distance—looks like our pursuers have discovered this place.

“We still have things to discuss, right?”

Without waiting for our reply, Hazel turns around and walks into the hut, reaching out her hand to open a door.

“If so, let’s have a change of location.”

She grabs the handle, and wooden shards rain down. Once she opens this door that seems like it’ll fall apart once you apply force to it, a little room around a foot in square area appears before us.

I really don’t know if I should call it a little room, or a closet you can’t go in, but

there's a square manmade hole in the center...

"Is it a toilet?"

Hazel takes away a few of the floorboards.

"A-and it's a cesspit..."

Otherwise known as the 'ker-ploomp' toilet. I've only seen these at my grandfather's house in the countryside, and that's not even in use anymore.

"Relax, nothing to be worried about. This place hasn't been used as a toilet. Get in there!"

Holding the wooden planks in one arm, she waves at us to go over. Conrad squirms inside first, while Josak pushes my arm from behind—because the sound of dogs is rapidly approaching.

There's a thin ladder as narrow as the opening underneath the hole. If it was an adult with wider shoulders, they might knock into the walls on both sides.

"Using the toilet for transport brings back not-too-nice memories... Pardon me for asking, but has this place really never been used as a toilet?"

Hazel, putting the planks back in place, replies without turning back,

"Only very few soldiers who get lost and wander in here, mistake it for a toilet and relieve themselves a little."

In that moment, I don't know if I should translate that line for the broad-shouldered spy.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Late night exploring Japan WITH koi.

Shouri booked a twenty-person dining hall, sitting in the middle of the sofa with his head high and chest straight. He's completed all the tasks given to him, so he can show off to his comrades now.

He agreed to Bob's request, which is to use the Japanese people's best technique, to host the girl Abigail Graves he unfortunately met in the VIP lounge, just a few hours ago. At first he did his best to reject it with a 'what does this have to do with me' argument, and planned to let Abigail handle her lodgings on her own, but she herself didn't seem to have the slightest desire to. Even if he brought Abigail to the hotel lobby, she would just stare at Shouri smilingly. Shouri was forced to bring the cheerleader captain in a kimono even comedy couples don't wear anymore—almost crimson-red and embroidered with fish in gold thread—wandering the streets at night.

But at that time Shouri never imagined that she would want to go to a manga café. The moment she saw the 24-hour sign, Abigail happily pulled Shouri's hand and walked inside.

Late night manga café WITH koi.

After reading a lot of Japanese manga there, they ran to a 24-hour karaoke. When he finally contacted Bo with his cellphone after the latter's party ended, he said in a half-threat, "I'm letting the koi loose now", and finally got Bob to come over. From manga cafes to karaoke... Although they didn't take the Hato Bus Tour, in some ways, it's still a very comprehensive tour of Japan.

And then right now, Abigail Graves is taking turns to use the remote control to pick songs with one hand, together with the newly-added mysterious man—Jose Rodriguez.

Furious, Shibuya Shouri says to the duo sitting opposite him,

“I did it, just like you said! I properly hosted this American geisha!”

Bob tilts his glass full of Oolong champagne, while Murata Ken holds his spoon full of curry rice still. Seeing them look so laidback, really pisses him off. His little brother is missing, why do they have the sweet time to eat curry rice!

The man Bob and Murata brought back from Haneda is also the embodiment of ‘laidback’. He watches the screen full of anime scenes, singing the song “This isn’t Anime!”^[1]. As for the hand holding the microphone, forget the pinky, even his thumb is sticking out.

“Oh, yeah? Who’s that guy who looks like he won’t be of any use at all?”

Not only does he look like he won’t be of any use, he basically looks like a troublemaker.

That man who calls himself DR Jose Rodriguez, has his finger-long black hair tied lightly behind. But that’s basically a pointless action, since there are still some tufts of hair sticking to his face or forehead. The narrow eyes behind his glasses always look like they’re smiling, thanks to the wrinkles around his eyes. Although he’s so skinny he looks sickly, that doesn’t mean he’s unhealthy. It’s just that, in Shouri’s Japanese eyes, he has a suspicious sort of feeling.

Apparently he wore weird windbreaker glasses when he arrived in the five o’clock flight, and the first thing he said was, “Hi~~ Everybody, how do I look? I’m channeling Quattro Bajeena^[2], you know!”

Recently as long as you wear huge sunglasses, a Darth Vader helmet, or a US president Reagan rubber mask or other confusing things, what’ll happen in ‘Come over here to make a statement!’. But it seems that because Bob has influence everywhere, Rodriguez got to avoid getting invited to another room for ‘a cup of tea’.

Thinking about that, Shouri suddenly wonder: What kind of DOCTOR is he? A professor in anime? Or the relative of an anime shop owner!?

“Ah—Rodriguez is my friend, and a doctor...”

“Oh—So that’s how it is. He’s sung four TWO-MIX^[3] songs in a row, too.”

At least he seems to get along really well with Abigail. They sure have

chemistry for the first time meeting, even enjoying the Japanese karaoke culture, looking just like an Abby & Rod duo.

“I can understand how tense you feel.”

Murata Ken sighs as he put down his spoon. It may be because his glasses are fogged up, but his expression is indecipherable.

“But we can’t do it at night, the brother of my friend. Just like you I want to find Shibuya as soon as possible too, but once it’s night time, we can’t find him even if we tried. Besides travelling was never too easy, so I hope we can make the proper arrangements before attempting it, to increase the chances of success as high as we can.”

“So nighttime flights don’t work, huh? Mn—then, Murata Ken, are there any specific ways?”

“Specific ways?”

“That’s right. Although yesterday all you tried was diving into dirty water, but now that you have that man there should be some changes, right? Like the magic runes getting an extra corner, or an increase in the spell power.”

The younger brother’s friend frowns, pressing his forehead and signaling, ‘he’s beyond help’,

“There’s no need for runes and spells. And the way to get to that world will change according to time and place, it’s not something we can say in a few lines. Besides, what are you asking so much for? Didn’t Bob say, not everyone can go there?”

“All we need is an exceptional power, wasn’t it?”

Bob raises his head up from the menu, his finger stopping above ‘fresh mushroom expansion-plan spaghetti’.

“What are you thinking, Junior?”

“Nothing much.”

The disco ball on the ceiling keeps reflecting the light off its mirrors, and the piercing rays hurts one’s eyes. Bob, on the other hand, refuses to take off his sunglasses even indoors at midnight, which, in some ways, is the right decision.

"You guys just go on with your plan. Likewise, I want to operate alone too. Just tell me the theory and the method. Anyhow I will prepare that phenomenal power, it shouldn't be that hard."

Bob closes up the menu, rubbing his brow with the tip of his finger lightly. The wrinkles around his mouth get even deeper.

"...I thought I said you can't do it, Junior."

"Don't call me in that confusing manner, I'm not your son!"

"And what is that phenomenal power you prepared?"

Rodriguez just happens to reach the instrumental part of his song, the entire room filled with high electrical-wave notes. Shouri leans onto the sofa, saying,

"That's a trade secret..."

"It's Bodensee, y'know—"

Abigail snatches the microphone from the doctor, standing on top of a stool and singing as she waves her sleeves,

"Boden-Boden-Boden-y'know—"

"Ah, Graves, don't say it out loud!"

Suddenly someone hits the table hard, the crockery emitting piercing sounds upon impact. The spoon on the saucer spins non-stop. At first Shouri wanted to ask, "What're you doing, friend of my brother?", but the words never left his mouth.

"That isn't a joke."

Even though the room is filled with pink or blue light, the change in Murata's expression is clear, his tone also turning so cold it's like he's a different person. If Yuuri was here, he would probably say, "Don't be friends with a guy who gets so dangerous when he loses it," right?

"Did you see Bodensee? The one in Germany? Hold on a second here, that isn't a joke, y'know."

"Not Germany, it's Switzerland..."

"It's all the same!"

“Murata.”

Bob grabs his shoulder to make him sit down, but he displays a rare, agitated reaction that fits his age, even scolding his elder continuously,

“Stop joking around! No matter what we can’t use that thing! Rather than bank on that power, it’d be better to let Niagara flow backwards! If you can only think of that method, no matter how persistent you are, I won’t let you go there.”

“You have no right to decide for me, right, friend of my brother. Besides all you say is ‘that’ or ‘that power’, what on earth is underneath that lake, why don’t you tell me?”

The song ends. Abby & Rod don’t continue playing songs, holding their breath nervously.

“Aaah, dammit!”

Murata takes off his glasses and messes through his hair forcefully. This isn’t like him, this isn’t like the usual him at all.

“Bother! Even if you want me to say it, that’s something beyond normal human comprehension. In any case the thing we sank into the Bodensee is... No, that wasn’t me!”

“Murata.”

Rodriguez calls his name in a gentle voice. Murata raises his right hand in lieu of a response, taking a deep breath,

“In any case, the thing in there is very dangerous, you must never ever use it simply, if you do, rather than saving Shibuya...”

He exhales deeply, releasing the excess breath, as though trying his best to restore his pulse to normal.

“...You’ll only force him to a dead-end.”

Shouri is still sitting on the sofa, looking at the agitated high school student in front of him. He slowly untangles the arms crossed in front of his chest, pushing his glasses frames up with his pointer finger,

"You said I'll force Yuu-chan to a dead-end? You're just a high school student, what right do you have to say that?"

Murata's blood pressure instantly skyrockets.

"You're utterly clueless!"

"No matter, it doesn't matter if you want to say I'm clueless about the situation. Anyhow I want to go there, no matter how dangerous it is, or if I have to go alone, I'm still going to Switzerland. Right, Bob, if I say I hope you'll invest a little with your platinum card—of course I would really welcome any sponsorships."

He was just yelling at Bob just now, so he shouldn't usually have the face to ask for pocket money. But the situation is urgent, and he can't care so much anymore. If it was just Shouri's credit card, just the two-way tickets and lodging would be a stretch. Faced with the sudden change in topic, Bob repeats the word with a look of surprise,

"Platinum card?"

Could it be that his credit card isn't gold or silver, but black? Shouri starts imagining how the legendary black card must look like. But the man known as the Maou of the financial world, says as he verifies if his chauffeur is still outside,

"My credit card isn't made of metal, but plastic, y'know. And I rarely buy things with my card either. There's no need to help the credit card company earn money, right?"

Bob snaps his fingers next to his ear, and his chauffeur immediately comes in. Technically this room should have a perfect soundproofing system, so how did he hear such a tiny sound? Could it be that Bob's finger-snapping has some sort of special dog whistle-like quality?

"...Wait, Bob, you changed chauffeurs?"

He still remembers that the chauffeur Bob hired in Japan last time was a polite-looking, fifty-plus gentleman. A man who was always wearing a grey hat, a tidy uniform, and was neither fat nor thin. He was always wearing white gloves, and the car was always polished until it sparkled. Although he was of the age when it wouldn't be surprising if he retired, the new guy is still too modern, right.

The new chauffeur standing next to his master, looks like he's better suited for other jobs besides holding a steering wheel. Brown skin wrapped in tight leather pants, he even has completely pointless chains hanging from his waist. His short cropped hair has been dyed red and yellow, his ears and lips all pierced, just looking at it feels painful. Although his height and chest aren't exactly above average, the muscles from his neck to shoulders are extremely well-developed, that's a body Japanese people can't get no matter how hard they trained.

In that sea of beautiful coffee-color, the white of his eyeballs and teeth are exceptionally striking.

"Society has gotten more dangerous these days, so I chose him to be my bodyguard from a certain organization."

The Maou of Earth, who is actually more dangerous than anyone else, gets the man to open the black leather wallet in his hands as he says,

"He was born in the Caribbean, his name is Francois."

"Fran... cois..."

"Bonjour."

The man greets in a husky voice that fits his appearance perfectly—it's French.

"Eh? Bo-bo-bo-bonji?"

The future governor candidate isn't good at French.

"His driving skills are pretty decent, you know. If you need long distance travel, just say it, I can send him over whenever. Don't college students always have to go out of town for workshops? Oh, yeah, Francois, give him five hundred."

After seeing the contents of the wallet, everyone's expression abruptly change.

"Ah, don't worry. He may look like this, but he is a qualified accountant! I feel real secure having Francois carry my wallet. You could call him a martial arts accountant."

Bob immediately explains. Even so, rather than calling him a chauffeur, it would be better to say he's in charge of watching Bob's wallet.

The man hands over a few bundles of white hundred US dollar bills, and Shouri

accidentally drops them. The new notes in their bundles fall to the cigarette-marked floorboards.

“Hey, heyheyheyhey, hey—Bob!? By five hundred you didn’t mean five hundred USD, but five hundred one hundred dollar bills!?”

Converted that would be over six million Japanese yen.

There are three normal citizens staring wide-eyed and wondering, “What on earth is the Maou’s financial situation like?” Besides, carrying so much cash into Europe, wouldn’t that cause a problem at customs? But Bob looks like it’s completely natural, and asks his new chauffeur to rearrange the rest of the money.

“It’s nothing, this is just some temporary investment. If it’s still not enough to meet your wishes, I’ll send my man there to assist you. Whatever you need, just tell him.”

“Bob...”

The one who speaks out softly, isn’t Shouri who’s looking confused at the large sum of one, but Murata, who has taken down his thin-rimmed glasses, the corners of his mouth twitching unnaturally.

“I thought you would object.”

Murata, trying to keep his emotions under control, continues carefully. In the memories of his past past life, Bob was still obviously on his side, so why would he help Shouri do something so stupid now?

“You should know the hell we had to go through back then, right? I thought you would definitely object bringing that thing back up.”

“Ken-chan...”

Rodriguez narrows his wrinkled eyes.

“...It shouldn’t be ‘we’, right?”

“That’s right... No, wait, now isn’t the time to care about things like that!”

Murata waves his right hand, so agitated it’s like he wants to toss away the glasses in his hands, but also as though he’s pointing at something that isn’t

there.



“You should know the terror of that thing. Although this is just my personal guess, but the fire that happened before, might just be caused by that thing too. And if even the last one returns there... We can’t take such a huge risk just to let him move to the other world. And more importantly, doing that won’t help Shibuya at all!”

But Bob raises his eyebrows lightly, like a father who discovered his kid’s prank, and just shrugs it away,

“It’s no point even if you force me. Shouri just is that kind of person, as long as it’s something he decided, it’s useless no matter how others try to persuade him. Since he’s serious, then I have no reason to object.”

“What are you saying!? You don’t have a reason to object!? Isn’t the threat that that Box poses, more than reason enough? Bob, snap out of it, you just have to order him, and you can stop him from using that sort of methods! Isn’t he your heir?”

“You’re right, Shouri is my heir. That’s precisely why, I won’t obey your instructions.”

He slowly uncrosses and re-crosses his legs, putting his hand on the sofa armrest. His fingertips propping up his chin, the man known as Bob smiles warmly, as he says in a voice without a hint of a smile,

“If you forget this, I would really be troubled. This is my world, it belongs to me. No matter what my heir wants to do, as long as it’s within the limits of my tolerance, you have no right to interfere.”

“.....!”

“It all belongs to me, y’know, Murata.”

His blood gushes upwards instantly, the unfamiliar emotion heating up his entire body. Murata is so mad he’s clenching his teeth, feeling his own helplessness deeply. No matter how long his memories go, the truth is he’s just an immature student, this mind and this body have only sixteen years of experience.

Just because he's in these warm times, huh?

He's not directing it at anyone, just mumbling it to himself. No, the truth is he knows who he's talking to.

Yuuri, maybe I do live in these warm times.

Maybe it's because I lived these past sixteen years without many obstacles, in an environment without loneliness and fear, so even my brain craves world peace now. If the one here weren't Murata Ken, but Henri Regent... or Nathan Morgan, or even the long-lived Lampedusa^[4], then maybe he could think of a more cunning plan.

The long thin metals in Murata's hands rub against each other, making an unpleasant screech. He forces out the words,

"...You plan on doing it by force?"

Bob just shakes his head and his finger, a signal that it's over.

The others heave a sigh of relief as though freed from a spell, and Shouri finally accepts the bag Francois hands over. He takes a few steps towards the door, then points his pointer finger at his brother's friend.

Pointing at him a finger gun.

"Too bad, Murata Ken."

The recipient just retorts him, unwilling to admit defeat,

"...What can you do even if you go there?"

"Then let me ask you, what can you do if you go there?"

Shouri shoots back the question unhesitatingly. There's no need to pity him.

"Graves!"

"YEAH?"

She answers in a way too American manner, making him frown in spite of himself. He initially wished she would pay attention to the time and place, speaking in a more beautiful voice.

"Introduce your family to me, then!"

“OH—This is the first step in dating, huh—the Japanese are as polite as—always.”

The girl in the glamorous kimono replies enthusiastically in a fake Japanese tone. She punches her fist into the air, completely disregarding the way her clothes jump upwards. As expected of a cheerleader captain, she can make the basic jumping movements.

“Don’t get me wrong, I don’t mean your parents. I’m referring to that treasure hunter great-grandmother of yours.”

“OH—So this is what they mean by ‘to eat people raw, first eat the horse YEAH!', right—”

“The original line is ‘to shoot a person, first shoot the horse’, you messed it up completely.”

As the heavy door closes, there’s also the sharp, clear sound of glass hitting the table and shattering.

References

1. ↑ Soundtrack from Mobile Suit Gundam ZZ
2. ↑ An ace pilot from Gundam (http://gundam.wikia.com/wiki/Char_Aznable)
3. ↑ Two-Mix is a Japanese pop music group formed in 1995 by Minami Takayama and Shiina Nagano. Their style is fast electronic pop. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two-Mix>)
4. ↑ I’m actually sorta in awe. “Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (December 23, 1896 – July 23, 1957) was an Italian writer. He is most famous for his only novel, Il Gattopardo (first published posthumously in 1958, translated as The Leopard), which is set in his native Sicily during the Risorgimento. A taciturn and solitary man, he spent a great deal of his time reading and meditating, and used to say of himself, ‘I was a boy who liked solitude, who preferred the company of things to that of people.’” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giuseppe_Tomasi_di_Lampedusa)

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Since my brain has such a convenient function, I should have been informed about earlier. This way at the very least during conversational English class, I wouldn't need to give the English teacher face, and I could just sail through the class.

"Who would have thought that my English would be so fluent?"

Although Hazel would occasionally ask me what I said, there are no communication difficulties between us at all. To be honest, I never thought that my middle high English with some katakana mixed inside, would actually be of use some day. I didn't think compulsory education was really that important.

But the problem is that when I discovered that I could speak English, I start remembering things I forgot. For example the number of the subways stops, a weird older sister who wasn't Gurrier but was a crossdressing guy as well, mermaids, a fortune-telling box that talked, the uniform of a convenience store I can't identify, and little duckies.

"There's even foreign street names... what on earth is this, could it be that my older brother took me running around before? Ah, I have the impression... Ah—but it seems to be some painful past..."

"A painful past?"

In the tunnel that can barely fit a grown adult, Josak can just turn his head around. His orange hair is almost hitting the ceiling, but before that, the torch in his hand might burn the similarly-colored hair to a crisp.

"Everyone has a painful past, Young Master. It's okay, you don't have to purposely remember it."

"If I can prevent my memories from resurfacing, I'd have done that a long time ago."

The problem is those memories are like water spilled onto a tablecloth, slowly

spreading wider and wider. At first they were just tiny slivers of memories, but they start expanding after absorbing enough water, and the images get clearer and clearer too.

“What the—What is this? What’s that outfit that looks like an aproned dress? Speaking of which, that couldn’t have been...”

Seeing me press my forehead as I walk, my protector seems a little worried.

Conrad uses a tone of unease different from his usual one, putting his hand on mine, the one pressing my forehead, from behind,

“Are you okay? If you think it hurts anywhere, do you want to tell her, and rest for a while first?”

“No no, rather than saying it hurts, it’s more like embarrassment! Ahh—ouch! That’s basically giving in and letting others do as they please! Could you just reject it a little, kid me!”

Hazel has always been walking in the far front of the twisting tunnel, so all we see of her is light and a petite silhouette.

“It may be because of Adalbert.”

“What about the muscleman? What does that mean?”

“Perhaps when he forced out the language of this world, he also broke a seal on your memories.”

“Broke a seal... Why do I have a ‘too little, too late’ kind of feeling.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Right now you’re just starting to wake up to the past that was on brake before.”

“On brake?”

I raise my head and look up, seeing his exceptionally solemn expression. The silver stars with their iridescent glow, are sparkling in the torchlight. It’s been such a long time since I saw him at such a close distance.

“In other words, the English you’re using isn’t just what you learned at school, but mostly likely includes the conversations you heard naturally as a child...”

“Oh, yeah, I count as someone who returned home from abroad too! Though it

was just a few short months, and it was when I was just born, when I was just a small BABY.”

“I heard of that.”

Just as we’re talking, my body’s experiences are awakening subconsciously. Something like a gun, burying my face in Bobba... Waa, STOP! Bobba? Pause for a sec there and rewind! In my haste my arm hits the hard mud wall, he stone on my pinky slicing away some of the dirt.

“Careful, there.”

“I’m fine, but what do you mean by ‘on brake’? And what’s the seal on my memories?”

To ensure that Josak can hear him too, Conrad raises his voice slightly, “I haven’t done any in-depth research on it, but most people keep their memories starting from when they’re two to three years old. As for before that, what happened as newborns or in the womb, there’s practically no recollection.”

“Mn, that’s true.”

“But just as I said before, the soul records everything down.”

It’s memories and records again, why is it getting more and more complicated.

“The reason you can understand the Shin Makoku language despite never being here, is because it was already recorded, accumulating in the depths of your soul. Those are definitely Your Majesty’s... Yuuri’s experiences from before you were born.”

I feel as though there’s a stone choking my throat, but I still manage a gulp. It’s just that my mouth is extremely dry, there isn’t even enough saliva for me to swallow.

“...In other words, I’m using the EXP from the previous owner of my soul to speak?”

Conrad’s expression doesn’t change, as he slowly nods.

“That’s it exactly. Those records that shouldn’t float to the surface, should be sealed behind an utterly unopenable door. After all it must not affect the

personality of the soul's new owner.

"Affect... Ah, is that so?"

The so-called soul's new owner, is me.

As for who the previous owner of the soul is, I have no idea.

"You don't have to know those kinds of things."

I thought for a moment there that my thoughts had been found out, so I can't help but stand in place. But those words didn't come from my mouth, instead it was Josak, who's walking ahead desperately to not lose sight of Hazel, saying in his regular tone,

"Standing from a point after being born, to be honest, it's no use even if you do know your previous life. As long as you use everything you own now, and live on desperately, with everything you have, then that's good enough."

"Well said, Gurrier! If I was Professor Kindaichi, I'd compile a book of 'Gurrier Quotes' for you."

"I'm so happy, Your Majesty! Gurrier is so touched!"

Once someone starts thinking about their past lives, then it's really game over.

I have been told the name of my past life before, but I won't simply believe a past I haven't seen with my own eyes. Even if the person who used the same soul as me was a king, at the most he would be as big as the Dessert World's King of Homeruns^[1]. The world is a very small place.

Besides, if someone said I was a girl they used to know, then I really wouldn't know how to react. If we met again, then how am I going to greet them, huh. Something like "President, your tie is really pretty"? Although there's no president, and no tie^[2].

The maseki that's back to hanging around my chest seems to be heating up, but I pretend not to notice. As I thought, pretending not to know anything and living on is the best way.

But Josak betrays my conclusion, saying carelessly,

"But the people around you would probably feel really troubled, right~"

I trip over a stone the torchlight couldn't reach.

"If they found out that the person who was a friend yesterday is actually the enemy, or their cute son is the reincarnation of someone who killed their family, then that would definitely be a real bother. They wouldn't know what to do, y'know."

"...That's why it must be sealed."

I suddenly realize Conrad's palm, pressed against my forehead, has become scalding hot.

"That's why it must be sealed tightly deep within the soul, so the people around them and they themselves will never notice. But Adalbert destroyed that seal, bringing out the memories that don't belong to Your Majesty. If it's just language, then it's not that serious. But if even the seal on the memories of back then are broken..."

"Wait a sec, wait a sec!"

I break free from his hand, my heels scrambling against the ground as I turn around.

"I'm just remembering things I saw and heard as a toddler. The memories should be from around three years old. As for the genius kindergarteners the neighbors talk about sometimes, isn't that just their idle chatter after a good meal? If I say, 'I even remember clearly how it was like inside my mummy's tummy—', then what kind of a situation would that be! Conrad, that would be way too exaggerated. So I say, you're overthinking this, and worrying for nothing."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

I grip the hand without the ring, lightly tapping the chest on his uniform. There's a 'thump', I can feel the force of the rebound, it feels as though I can even touch his heartbeat.

"Worrying for things for me, should be Günter's job, right?"

"But, I also wish to be able to share your worries... Please allow me to."

Maybe it's because of the wavering torchlight, that expression looks close to tears. But it isn't me, it's him.

"Even if it's just for now."

So many retorts appear in my mind, like 'that isn't something you should say to a sixteen-year-old boy' or 'there are already rumors flying around town, saying you and Günter are too overprotective of me'. At the end I still didn't rebut him, just repeated the same, short and simple answer.

"It's okay."

I'll say it again, I'm okay.

There's nothing in this world that would make me more grateful now, than the cheerful spy's random interruption. Josak treats everything jokingly, the way he holds the torch to his face and waves it crazily, is like a fire dance, and only he can say whatever he wants without hesitation.

"Isn't that too dangerous, Gurrier!?"

"Thank goodness—His Majesty still worries about Gurrier."

"That's not it, if you really want me to say it, I'm more worried for the torch..."

I suddenly hear someone calling us, and so I look past Josak's shoulder and ahead—Hazel Graves, now way far ahead, is yelling at us from the top of her lungs,

"BOYS, did you leave your feet at home?"

The two of us who understand English shrug, thinking, 'Conrad shouldn't count as a BOY, right?' If she knew the difference between how he looks and his true age, surely she would be fairly surprised.

The one who starts yelling weirdly after hearing the true age isn't Hazel, but me.

"Are you that old!?"

If what she says is true, then she should be an old grandmother over a hundred and twenty years old. All that about it being rude to ask a lady's age, she's long

past that. But on the surface she only looks around seventy, seems her aging is different from the mazoku's.

If I count Conrad and Josak as well, then standing between the trio of centenarians, I sincerely feel that the elderly these days are extremely active. It really feels as though they've become Dokumamushi Sandayū^[3].

"But shizoku have long lives, just like the mazoku, huh."

"No, it's true that they tend to live to a hundred and fifty or so, but I haven't heard of them aging slower like you guys. Their bodies will stiffen up once they're past a hundred, and quite a few of them stay bedridden because of it."

That's what she says, but Venera, also known as Hazel Graves, has easily leapt across that chasm. Who does she mean by 'their bodies will stiffen up'?

"I take good care of my body normally, it wasn't easy to last this long, but it seems I'm almost at my limit now too. Besides, I'm not from this world, so the effect of time on my body will be more or less different."

"Hold on, I can't pretend I didn't hear that. You're not from this world? What does that mean? Could it be that Grandma Hazel is just like me..."

"About that, Lord Weller should know it well."

That half a face illuminated by torchlight curves into a smile, her hand continuously exploring a few spots on the wall, as though looking for a bump or something.

"I died decades ago. In the United States on Earth... Also known as America."

"America!?"

"...1936 AD, you suddenly disappeared from the outskirts of Boston."

In my surprise I blurt out, "That's seventy years ago!"

Conrad watches the old lady's every move, continuing,

"And you disappeared in a fire together with the house you just moved into."

"That's right, logically speaking I should have burned to death back then, but I'm still as lively as ever right now, I wonder why? When I first came here, I even thought this is the afterlife. But if this is heaven, then it's rather too sinister. It

made me think that I didn't do anything good in my life, and that's why the gates of heaven wouldn't open for me."

"No, no, this isn't hell or paradise."

Of everyone here only I hasten to refute her. That's no joke, if it really as what Graves said, then wouldn't I be dead as a doornail too? And besides, I've come and gone from here quite a few times, now even the people in Japan over there won't think I mysteriously disappeared.

"That's right, I've figured out this isn't the afterlife. But back home they must have held my funeral, and built a little tombstone for me, huh. So 'Hazel Graves' is officially dead. From that moment I broke the taboo and touched 'that', and was enveloped in blue flames."

"That's right, you opened the Box. And then you were blown here by the impact."

"Conrad!"

Just as the conversation was interrupted, the wall makes a heavy noise and slides aside. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that the door here is made of a thick stone slab, and it's a large round stone that can move to a side, too. But now isn't the time to stand in awe of a rigged underground passage.

"You mentioned the Box?"

I'm so tense even the tips of my fingers turn cold.

"You mentioned the Box just now, didn't you? You mean the four Boxes that put us through hell and back? Those things..."

My throat hurts so much, as though I've swallowed ice cubes.

"Are here?"

"Not here exactly!"

Hazel Graves watches my expression as she takes half a step in the direction of the stone wall.

"It's further north, on the edge of this continent. The shinzoku lands are very vast."

Her gaze is appraising me. It feels like I'm passing through the detectors in an airport, a displeasing feeling.

"Since coming to this world, little old me hasn't been able to cross the ocean. Although I can't compare to other countries, but according to my sense of distance from when I was alive, this place should be as big as Australia."

Hazel even adds, laughing, "But there aren't any sheep here."

"Just like its name, 'Country of the Holy Sand', there's only wind and yellow sand here. Forget oases, there aren't even any decent types of plants."

"Though you're not a shinzoku, you sure know this place well."

"How long do you think I've lived here? Li... His Majesty over here already said it all surprised, right? Seventy years, y'know. After staying in the same country for seventy years, I know a lot more about this country than the kids born here."

She beckons us into a small stone hut, bringing the torch to the oil lamp on the walls. In the many intricate drawings, there are people, livestock, and images of what looks like gods. The room about twenty tatamis^[4] big, looks like it's been drowned in bright red, coming off as majestic.

"Waa—"

Even Josak, who doesn't have much of an interest in arts, can't help but praise,

"This is... a temple or some house of worship...?"

"Now it's just a simple gathering area. But around two hundred years ago, apparently it had the important position of 'entrance'. Listen up, I'm going to explain it to you."

Hazel knocks the innermost wall. For some reason, her gaze isn't trained on Conrad, who's well-versed in English, but at me.

"The walls of this room are each connected to different passages, but you must never go on, because there's a maze ahead. In the past that used to be an underground city where people lived, but since two hundred years ago when the last batch of citizens were taken out, it's been abandoned to this day. Even seventy years ago when I arrived here, there was only an impenetrable darkness, with not a single sliver of light to depend on. Listen carefully, if you don't want to

die, never cross these walls. If you don't have a powerful guardian angel next to you, there's no way at all you can survive in the mazes ahead."

"But Grandma Hazel passed it."

"You can't really say I passed through all of it."

She shakes her dusty white hair, sitting on the hard ground. What's unbelievable is, her pose isn't as straight as it was earlier, making her look like just another petite and exhausted old lady. She supports her forehead with her thumb and pointer, head bowed and spirits low,

"...I didn't walk here from the other end either, that's simply impossible. All I did was duck inside halfway and walk a small distance to avoid the horseback tribe on the surface. But just that small distance was almost enough to drive me insane. Do you believe me? I, who went through countless ruins and explored so many tombs, nearly lost my mind!"

Hazel seems to be talking to herself, telling of the maze's terrors,

"I've eased my way through raining bullets, went toe-to-toe against wild beasts in the forest, even inched my way through caves, and was trapped in a shipwreck underwater. But I... that darkness really is something else. This is different from treasure-hunting on Earth, completely different."

Technically, Josak shouldn't be able to understand the language she's speaking, but he doesn't interrupt all the same. It could be that from the atmosphere around here, he can sense what she's saying.

"There were people living in the underground city up to three hundred years ago, and I heard it was rather prosperous then, too. Though it's still no match for the cities on the surface. The residents were all the lowest of the low among the slaves, and weren't allowed to live on the surface. But at least back then it wasn't utter darkness, and there were torches illuminating the passages everywhere, so they weren't a dark maze either. But a certain Seisakoku monarch brought all the slaves living underground to the surface. That tyrant didn't care about these people, and didn't want to care about these people, so from the on this place has become somewhere not blessed by the gods. When I was wandering the maze, I thought I had been abandoned by the gods..."

Her voice is so low it's like a murmur,

"...That's the Box of taboos created by the gods, once you're driven by desire to touch it, you will receive divine punishment..."

"That's not it, Hazel."

I speak up without thinking.

The old lady raises her head, meeting my eyes directly.

"It actually has nothing to do with God."

"Why?"

I'm still standing straight, and my feet are still on the ground, as I lower my head to look into her hazel eyes. Although it feels as though the beasts drawn onto the walls are about to pounce on us, that's just an illusion caused by the firelight.

"It has nothing to do with God. That was created by the mazoku to seal away an ancient threat, eventually sealed and hidden away. All that happened long before you or I were born, a long long time ago. Right, Lord Weller?"

I can feel Conrad nod in agreement behind me.

"So, even if you met misfortune due to the Box, it's definitely not divine punishment. The gods you believe in haven't abandoned you. It's just I... all I can say is, 'I feel so sorry for you'..."

Hazel Graves lifts her head to look at me and Lord Weller behind me, falling into a long silence, before opening her mouth slightly, singing a certain familiar melody in a tiny voice. Her voice is gruff, and the lyrics are blurred, but that is definitely the song that boy once sang in front of the palace.

"What is..."

I don't get to complete my question because someone nudges my shoulder, preventing me from continuing. When I look to my side, I find Lord Weller has his eyes narrowed, and though he doesn't say anything, I know what he means. He probably knows what song this is.

I wait motionlessly, until Hazel suddenly stops singing. Her expression is that of

a child who was caught crying in a corner,

“If only someone sang this at my funeral for me, that’d be great.”

“I don’t know if anyone sang this song...”

Conrad takes a step forward, reaching his left hand out to Hazel on the floor — it’s that left hand.



"I heard that many close friends and relations attended your funeral, singing and sighing over your death. Even people who live far away and don't usually interact, used that chance to rekindle past friendships. Your daughter and her husband had positive outlooks, as well. As a way of remembering the deceased, it was truly a great farewell."

"That's wonderful, I'm glad. But this feeling sure is strange, learning about my own funeral in a foreign land."

"And your heir, April Graves became an impressive figure, just as you wished."

Halfway through getting up, Hazel's expression suddenly turns solemn, frozen mid-motion. That's a name I never heard before, but it should be her granddaughter.

"You said April..."

"Two years after you disappeared, she came across the 'Box' by accident. Just like you."

In that moment I doubted my ears. There were four 'Boxes' originally, how many of them are in this world? And how many are on Earth!? No, more importantly, why are the things threatening this world appearing on Earth? Just hearing that makes me restless with worry, but seeing Hazel's agitated expression, it seems that there's no chance for me to interrupt with a question related to the mazoku.

"To think that child... That child met the same fate as me!?"

"No..."

Lord Weller grips Hazel's slender, wrinkled fingers tightly with his left hand.

"She and some friends... You should know them, I think they were your friends, called Regent and DT. With their help, April sank that Box into the water, getting past the German army's detection without triggering the taboo."

The old lady looks relieved, the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth deepening.

"I met April Graves once, she said she's extremely proud of you."

"Is that so..."

Conrad says, with a smile of someone cheering up their own grandmother,
"She's a lot like you."

"Thank you, there's no news better than that."

This time she really cries.

Hazel Graves holds Conrad's hands, tears flowing down her thin, gaunt face.

Her time has finally been connected again.

References

1. ↑ Japanese confectionary company once invited Oh Sadaharu, who holds the world lifetime homerun record to shoot an ad for the 'NABONA' dessert, the tagline being 'NABONA is the dessert world's king of homeruns!'
2. ↑ There's probably a reference here, will try to verify.
3. ↑ An actor popular with the elderly (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanday%C5%AB_Dokumamushi)
4. ↑ One tatami is around 2mx1m, it's a removable mat used to make a patron in the floor of a room, Japanese people use it as a measurement unit counting the amount of tatami used in a space.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

The red room is a sort of gathering place, just as Hazel said.

"Didn't I tell you before, the Seisakoku people believe that their gods' power doesn't reach belowground. So we reversed its purpose, and use this place as somewhere to discuss matters. And if there's no necessity, the soldiers will never step in here. Because to them this is an ominous place. But to people against the emperor, this is the ultimate hiding spot."

As we're listening to her experiences these past seventy years, a few shinzoku arrive, staying put once they find their shelter. Their outfits are all simple and tattered, wearing threadbare slippers and clothes on this cold land, shivering in the cold. Thankfully the temperature belowground is a lot warmer than on the surface, and there's also torchlight for illumination in the room, so it should be more comfortable than running around in the night.

Some of them bring in bags with a little simple food, and others bring rolls of low-quality paper. Maybe maps or some sort of blueprint.

Josak has his arms crossed over his chest, standing guard by the stone door, and scaring the newcomers into staggering back a few steps. But they don't attack us, giving me the impression that the slaves in Seisakoku are all rather well-tempered. I had the same feeling when we were on the boat, maybe it's because they're not violent by nature.

Whether that's a good point or a weak point, I'm unable to conclude.

There are also amongst them some people who ran here out of curiosity to see the black-haired group, but they all backed away, nodding obediently once Hazel barks a loud order.

Seems like not only is Hazel senior in age, she's also the leader of this faction.

But after five more people enter the room, I can't help but offer her a suggestion. Because even I feel a little awkward.

"Uhm—Should we introduce ourselves or something?"

The gazes make me feel very uncomfortable. But that's no wonder, after all their leader brought in unfamiliar foreigners, anyone would find that suspicious. Besides even though they look worn and their clothes tattered, they are after all the mazoku envoy who were supposed to have talks with the emperor Yelshi. I don't know if anyone here knows the exact details, but just hearing a foreign language must be enough to make them feel uneasy.

"Because the way we look must seem really suspicious to these people, right? Not only are our hair and eye colors completely different from them, we're also speaking an unknown language."

"Your Majesty is my guest, not some suspicious strangers. I planned on waiting for everyone to arrive before making introductions... But to be honest, even I don't know how to explain this."

Maybe because she's getting up there in the years, the wrinkles in Hazel's brow seem even deeper, her expression hesitant to speak.

"Even if I know you're not the enemy, I don't have enough conditions to prove that you're on our side. After all, I can't even tell what your motive is, right?"

"Motive..."

Under the many golden gazes and Hazel's red-brown eyes, I'm suddenly at a loss for words.

There are many motives for this trip, but they're too complicated to be explained at once, and it's hard to determine whether the talks with the brothers, Saralegui and Yelshi, can progress any further. Besides that, even more importantly, not just Hazel, but all the citizens in this country don't even know they're actually brothers!

"Our reason for crossing the ocean, was to witness the restoration of bilateral ties between Seisakoku and Shou Shimaron. But it was always to witness a third party, with absolutely no plan to interfere with the discussions between the two countries."

Be it from Shin Makoku's or Dai Shimaron's point of view, Lord Weller's words are extremely neutral and impassive.

"But some unforeseen circumstances interrupted the discussion, so we had no choice but to leave the Shou Shimaron king, Saralegui behind as we excused ourselves."

"I see, there were unforeseen circumstances..."

Hazel touches her forehead with a cracked finger.

"But you seem to have retreated under fairly dangerous circumstances, huh. Don't tell be you weren't attending peacefully? Forget it, I'm not suspecting your identities, just worried that you and the Shou Shimaron king aren't here for something as simple as restoring relations, and have a more sinister motive. For example..."

Just then the stone door opens, and she glances towards it. It seems to be an old acquaintance of hers, just raising a hand in lieu of a greeting.

"You may be searching for something extremely of use, and can be made into a weapon."

I grip my fist tightly, damp sweat breaking out across my palm.

"...You're talking about the Box, aren't you?"

"Because Your Majesty is the king of the mazoku, and you said so yourself that the dangerous Box was created by you guys, right? If so, it wouldn't be weird for Your Majesty to come retrieve it personally. At the very least you would know more about using it than an outsider who just happened to accidentally come to another world."

If only that was so.

I can't help but sigh inwardly, my voice becoming stiffer. Who'd have thought that after cancelling the summit with Saralegui and Yelshi, I would have to confer with the local underground leader—Hazel Graves, instead. But just this sort of scheming and testing each other out is already getting to be too much for me, I don't even have time to catch my breath.

My so-called scheming, is only to mumble senselessly and try to throw them off their game.

"Whether you believe it or not, I'll just be honest with you. We... At the very

least, I'm not here to grab the Box, and besides we didn't expect it to be in this continent anyway. And..."

I raise my head to look at Conrad, he says to me in a completely monotonous voice, "It should be 'Inferno on the Tundra'." That's right, the Boxes' names are 'Wind's End', 'Ends of the Earth', and the one we just knew is here, 'Inferno on the Tundra'.

"I never once thought of using 'Inferno on the Tundra' as a weapon."

"Should I believe everything you say just like that?"

"I know no one can suddenly believe someone they just met. But we mazoku created those Boxes to seal away that power, and definitely not to be used by other countries or races. Even if I know the location of the Box now, to be honest I'd want nothing more than to leave it there untouched. If only I could sign a pact so that no one could abuse it. Like Dai Shimaron or Shou Shimaron..."

I pause—because I remember the boy king's crime.

"If you can guarantee that it won't fall into Saralegui's hands, and you won't abuse it, then I won't enquire about its whereabouts any further."

He once gathered criminals in the name of experimenting, and caused mass destruction to Caloria. It's as different as possible from Anissina's ideals, which is to enhance everyone's strengths.

"Really?"

She uses those hazel eyes, just like her name, to stare at my face. Since she's smaller than me, naturally she's looking up at me. But the reason I feel such discomfort is her eyes. She has the eyes of someone who can see through everything, appraise everything.

"Don't make the mistakes I made, owning a precious Box with incredible power. According to the records that survived, it may even be on par with Germany's newly-designed bombs. That's a terrifying thing that combines fusion and fission, strong enough to destroy a city. Once you have that much power in your hands, can you resist the temptation to use it?"

"We won't use it. And to make sure it won't be used by others, I hope to hide it

somewhere deeper, somewhere it will never be found.”

Hazel stares at me, falling into a silence that lasts five whole minutes. I feel as though in that time, she’s been looking deep within my heart. And then her expression softens, turning back to that of a kind old lady.

“No offense, but I always thought that Little... Sorry, His Majesty here looks a lot like a Japanese person from Earth. If a country like that got such a brutal weapon, I really wouldn’t know what would happen to the world.”

“...a country like that...”

Nothing I can do about it, Hazel Graves’ world history knowledge stopped at 1936AD. Back then the whole of Japan was under military rule, and America hadn’t joined the war. Not only that, the World Wars haven’t even started. She doesn’t know how the 20th century ended.

“International politics sure are complicated--”

“Yeah.”

Conrad, who knows a bit about the world after that, says as though to comfort me, all dejected. But I rather hope someone could comfort me with something like, ‘You’re doing a wonderful job.’

Hazel, who has no idea why I’m upset, apologizes with a laugh,

“So sorry, I actually did something as stupid as judging a book by its cover. It’s because I haven’t seen any black-haired and black-eyed people in a long time. But Your Majesty looks very honest, and extremely adorable to boot, it must be easy for you to win over the ladies. You’re worlds away from a certain Asian friend of mine.”

After that she turns solemn again, the gentle old grandma image disappearing in the blink of an eye. This should be “Venera’s” expression.

“And more importantly, you are the king of the mazoku, the only existence that can oppose Shimaron. I hope you’re trustworthy, or everything we’ve done to this day, will never come to fruition. The reason we keep on escaping on boats, is so that the outside world can know what this country is like now, that’s why we need to transmit the information to the other side of the ocean. Do you

know what kind of wrecks our comrades had to ride across the sea in?"

"All that I know. I've come into contact with them before. To be honest, that was a very rash move."

"That's right, it's basically suicide."

They actually let those people ride those old ships no better than fishing vessels across those rapid torrents. And most of them drifted to Shou Shimaron, where eventually only the kids were taken away, and rest deported back. I rub my chest through my clothes, my heart aching from the uneasy feeling. That was when I got this letter from the twins I befriended—the letter that Jason and Freddy wrote. Moreover, this letter is also filled with Zeda and Zusha's wishes and hopes on me.

In fact, behind that thin piece of paper, there's probably many, many more, tens of thousands of people and their wishes.

"Even so, we have no choice but to set sail, because someone has to lead the advance. We've been doing the same thing for more than thirty years now, but we've confirmed that Shimaron land is off limits. Surely you are also aware what fate awaited our comrades who drifted to Shimaron. But on the other hand we're not sure about any other countries besides Shimaron, because we have not the slightest clue about them. I figure they're either completely ignored, or exploited as ready-made labor."

My wandering gaze falls on Josak, who got some yellow cube-shaped thing from a woman, and is pointing at his mouth to ask if it is edible. That shinzoku lady tears it into strips with her slender fingers, bringing it to his mouth with a smile. They obviously can't understand each other, but he still managed to mix with them in such a short time. Hazel seems to have seen the same image, her expression softening slightly.

"Just as we were sending people out to sea, the war got more and more intense. We heard that Shimaron even split into two, that info was leaked by the merchants who visited Dejima. At the same time we also know about the forces opposing Shimaron. I was really very surprised, Shimaron obviously hasn't colonized as much land in these past hundred years as Rome or the British Empire. But since this continent is sealed off, the environment only allows us

limited intel, that's why we feel as though the whole world belonged to Shimaron. Just thinking that monopoly of the world has fallen into Shimaron hands, and is divided into the kings of Dai and Shou Shimaron no less, fills my comrades and I with despair."

The spy is chewing the food he requested, all carefree. Even if it's boring because you can't understand English, Josak, you're such a glutton. But I still force myself to bring my attention, which nearly got sidetracked, back to Venera's topic.

"But Shimaron didn't win the war, did it?"

It's another country's business, but Hazel is still laughing so happily her shoulders won't stop shaking,

"Do you know how I felt, when I heard that some countries didn't bow to the pressure, and can even fight back? I felt that the world was so big. Thinking that, other than Dai and Shou Shimaron, there might be other places that won't oppress the victims, even dreaming that if that country knew about our situation, would they stand up for us as peacemakers? So I start harboring hope... But, hope is such a troublesome thing."

Hazel opens her palms skywards and shrugs her shoulders, the foreigner pose I always see in the movies.

"...At the end I couldn't stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Stop the boats from going out to sea."

"Why has it come to that?"

I grip my hands and loosen them again, flustered, wiping the sweat on them on my thighs.

"So you're saying that, though all the shinzokus know how reckless setting sail on such rickety boats is, they still won't stop trying to escape... it's actually all because of us... because Shin Makoku was at war with Shimaron? If the mazokus had surrendered without a word like the other countries, then you guys might have given up sooner, and there wouldn't have been so many needless

sacrifices?"

"That's not what I meant, Your Majesty."

Looking at Hazel's deprecating expression, I bite my lip wordlessly.

"I just wanted to say, the country that defeated Shimaronn gave us hope."

Hope.

Hearing that simple word, I remember one of the reasons I'm standing on this land.

Venera, hope, save.

That's right, we... at least, I wasn't here to find the Box, and not to stop Seisakoku and Shou Shimaron restoring their relations either. I'm here to fulfill the wish Jason and Freddy wrote to me in their letter, and save them. I said before I would take responsibility for their lives, because I promised them.

"If we're talking about hope, it should be you, Venera."

I purposely avoid her real name, using the name people praise instead.

"You motivated those who were treated as slaves, mistreated, and had no power to object, letting them know that they can lead completely different lives, and taught them the way to change their current situation. Not only did you teach them, you even led them into concrete actions, didn't you? The one who gave the people of this country hope, isn't Shin Makoku who signed a peace treaty with Shimaron, but Hazel Graves."

Jason, Freddy, I've come here looking for you, just like we agreed. What are you actually hoping for? How do I save Venera, this symbolic existence?

"The reason I came to this land even after being separated from my comrades, is to fulfill my deal with my friends, those twins. Those two wanted me to save Venera. Jason and Freddy are two girls, around twelve-years-old, do you know where they are?"

"Jason and Freddy... those names sound familiar... did those two girls ask Your Majesty to save me?"

I don't know if it's because she has no clue about the twins' whereabouts, or

because this has to do with her own safety, but after Hazel ponders over it seriously for a few minutes, she says something that sounds like fortune teller,

"Those names don't sound like shinzoku names, they shouldn't belong to the slave class, right?"

"I think they were taken from here shortly after they were born, and were raised by the foster care organization overseas. Maybe the people there gave them those names. Their majutsu... No, houjutsu is really strong. Like they were born with houryoku. Wait a sec, according to what Saralegui said..."

According to what Saralegui said, no matter how high a status you're born into, any child without houryoku will be treated as a slave, not even one of the queen's twins can be exempted. On the other hand there's Jason and Freddy, they have powerful houryoku, and unlike other houjutsu users, they don't need to rely on houseki to display astonishing destructive force. I can't match up to the tip of one of their toes, even.

Since they possess such scary attack power, it's highly likely that they don't belong to the slave class. That means I'm trying to save kids who are different from the people here, in that they have better surroundings and facilities? And so I'm at a loss, unsure of whether I should say that out loud.

Josak flicks his finger beside my face, whispering to me, "It looks like they'll feed us, you know."

"Why don't you take this chance to catch your breath, I'm sure Young Master is hungry as well, right?"

As for the woman who was standing by his side just now, she's fumbling around her sack with a friendly smile. The problem is they already have very little food as it is, and yet they are still willing to share some with foreign strangers they've never met before.

What kind of expression should I wear to tell them, "I'm not here to help you"?

It's Hazel, though, who ignores my hesitation and suddenly yells,

"It's the returnees!"

"Eh?"

"Those two are returnees from abroad. When it comes to those who returned from the other end of the ocean, to differentiate them from the slaves who mostly don't understand the outside world, that's how we call them. If so, when I do my rounds normally, I may have seen them once or twice."

Hazel says all that at once, and even laughs self-deprecatingly,

"After all, I was originally the old lady who pulled the manure cart."

There's already a high school baseball boy as Maou, a resistance leader who transports organic fertilizer is nothing surprising.

"But, if those two children really are returnees... I'm sorry, they're being held at a very scary place."

"They're being held!? But they're not criminals or rebels, for all you know they're not even slave-class children, right!? According to the value system in this country, aren't children with high houryoku members of the elite?"

What she's saying makes me feel rather uneasy. The girls I'm looking for aren't pets or livestock that have to be chained up, their movements restricted.

"That's only for good citizens who've never left the country their whole lives, whilst returnees don't have it so well. If they're really clueless, then they won't harbor any suspicions about the current system, and they'll be able to swear loyalty to the gods and the ruler. But once they've known the outside world, then it's impossible for them to not notice the problems here, so they'll be even more troublesome than simply the slaves."

"Troublesome...!"

Hazel scratches her hair with her dry hands, shaking her head in despair,

"That's why the returnees are isolated, and held in specialized facilities. To prevent them from teaching the people around them, and thus bringing a bad influence. But those places are called facilities in name only, and in reality they're just concentration camps in the middle of nowhere. They're just like prisoners, it's no different from being incarcerated in prison."

"Oh my god!"

"Those facilities are scattered all across the country, one of them isn't too far

away from Yelshiurad. Every twenty days they'll send supplies over there. The supply cart isn't pulled by me, but by oxen. Since I never opened the covers, I don't know what's inside, but judging from the smell, it doesn't seem to be the prisoners' food. Maybe it's the personal necessities of the officials who work in such an isolated area."

Hazel's tone is full of sympathy. Because of me, those two girls are in a situation even worse than that of the people here.

"When I'm in charge of helping transport the supplies, I'll try my best to get around there a bit more. Because there are a lot of people there who failed to get away and got deported back, so I have a responsibility towards them."

Her voice is mixed with pity and pain, clenching her teeth and speaking slowly to maintain her cool. But I can't listen to her talk calmly anymore. It feels as though the ground underneath my feet has turned to sand, and my body is starting to sink downwards. Just keeping my balance takes a lot out of me.

"...It's all me."

I spread open my hands to hold my trembling cheeks, the cold pale red houseki stuck on my little finger now plastered to the corner of my eyes. I'm extremely angry, hating someone from the very bottom of my heart, but I can't let out my emotions so easily.

Because, all the responsibility is on me.

"I was the one who put them in such a terrible place..."

"No, Your Majesty."

Conrad grabs my shoulders, helping me finally dispel that feeling of falling. But words of regret start forming in my mind,

"If only I'd stopped them back then. Forget stopping, at the very least I should have investigated the political state of Seisakoku and the shinzoku culture before sending them back... If I had convinced them to wait until then, this wouldn't have happened."

"This isn't your fault."

I shake away his hands, turning to him, but suddenly my whole body just falls

towards the wall. Hazel's expression changes abruptly, staring directly at the stone wall behind me. That time, I still had no idea what I'd done.

"No, I should have just followed them here. Back then I'd said so proudly that I would be responsible for them until the end, but at the most important moment I handed them over to someone else to handle. I should've personally sent them back, I should have seen them obtain their happiness with my own eyes! That's right, what about the other kids that were with them? Don't tell me those kids have met such misfortune as well..."

"This isn't your fault!"

"Young Master?"

Josak, having sensed something amiss, rushes over here. He glances at Conrad, at the same time putting his hand on his sword. Looks like Conrad's still under suspicion, if I were him, I'd surely feel terrible about it.

"That's why I said, Young Master, you should catch your breath first and eat something. If you talk about these serious things on an empty stomach, you'll stand until you get dizzy and finally you'll faint, you know."

"It's not because I'm hungry, sheesh."

"No!! It's precisely because you're hungry!"

He concludes, sounding absolutely sure of himself.

"Thinking of things on an empty stomach, will never come to any good.' Those are our ancestor's words of wisdom, passed down through the generations, even His Majesty Shinou said that before."

"On the contrary, when you eat too much the blood gathers in your gut and... Mmph!"

"Stop forcing your way out of this. Listen up, Your Majesty: this is something only someone who's truly been hungry would know!"

Gurrier, looking like a middle-aged auntie in his long-sleeved apron, stuffs the yellow cube thing into my mouth. The taste on my mouth is something between cheese and yoghurt, and then he turns around to face Lord Weller, moving almost automatically,

"It's been tested for poison."

"...I know."

Although Gurrier exaggerated that it's the ancestral words of wisdom, it seems that half of it is true. Ad I'm chewing what seems to be a dairy product, that sense of self-hatred seems to have decreased somewhat, and what rises is a little energy to think of my words and actions just now... more or less. It's still mostly the self-hatred, though.

It's depressing, that I actually made such a serious mistake in such an important part of someone's life. Just thinking about that stupid thing I did and the consequences, makes me feel as though even the beasts on the wall behind me are laughing at me.

But it isn't over yet.

There's still ninety per cent left to go in Jason and Freddy's lives, I still have a chance to make it up to them.

"...Please tell me."

"Tell you what?"

Hazel, who was standing by and quietly watching me, now retorts with a question, her arms folded over her chest.

"The places where the returnees are being isolated, please tell me everything you know about it. Starting with the one closest to the capital. Hey--!"

I wave over the young shinzoku standing in the corner of the room, praying that the paper cylinder in their hands is a map.

"I have to save them... I have to!"

Hazel raises her chin comically, cracking her knuckles like a tough guy.

"All right, at least you got guts."

There absolutely no trace of the gentle old grandma anymore.

"Looking at Little Buddy here reminds me of my granddaughter! She's a stubborn kid who doesn't know how to give up, back then when we separated, she was about as old as you are now. I'll do my best to help you. After all, those

two girls brought Your Majesty over here because they were worried about me, right?”

“I guess you could say so.”

“They’re already in danger, but they’re still worried about others, so I can tell they’re good children who were raised right. How can I just let them be... Right, let’s start from here.”

And with that she unfurls the paper on the ground, pressing down on the right side with her knee. The map of the entire Seisakoku is surrounded by wave symbols, looking like an enormous shell. It’s a map made by the locals, but there are still obvious signs differentiating the mountainous areas and the plains. Though there are quite a few mountain ranges represented here, but as a whole, there’s doesn’t seem to be too many drastic changes in the topography.

I follow Hazel’s fingertip, moving towards the center, west, and south-east.

“I know these four places: north-west of Yelshiurad, the east cliffs, opposite Dejima... and...”

Her finger slows down when she reaches the fourth place, as though that place is even more terrifying than the previous three. I raise my head to look at her with eyes full of disbelief, and the corners of Hazel’s mouth lift with something like cynicism. She doesn’t seem to test my patience anymore, either, and continues,

“And there’s one here, on the northern-most tip of the continent, surrounded by the royal mausoleums, where some horseback tribes hold the actual authority, under the pretense of watching the royal tombs.”

“What do you mean by ‘hold the actual authority’?”

Could it be that Seisakoku isn’t under an absolute monarchy? Doesn’t Yelshi hold all the authority? Just as I’m making to ask her, Hazel’s next words dispel all my doubts. What she says is this—

“That was the place I first landed when I came to this world, that time when I came here together with the ‘Box’.”

“What did you say!? T-then, that thing is there, too?”

"Right, it's highly likely. If no one found it, it should still be sleeping in the old tombs, hibernating together with the riches of the previous emperors. I just hope that after my desperate break for freedom, no one went in there to raid the tombs."

Hazel ignores the way we look at each other, continuing to pretend that she doesn't see any of us,

"But back then I was actually in an ancient tomb. Isn't that the best place to trap a treasure hunter? If that Box had a conscience, it would have a rather good sense of humor."

What a painful joke. Especially towards those of us who had witnessed the destruction of Caloria.

But I give up protesting, there's really no need to increase the number of people who know the Box's secret anymore. Though to be precise, I lost the chance to protest, because everyone's attention is pulled to a sudden, heavy sound.

That's the sound of someone knocking the stone from outside, intense and frantic. The young man closest to it quickly pulls aside the stone door.

"Venera!"

The man yells Hazels name as soon as he comes in, rushing in and talking non-stop. After he hands over the paper slip in his hands, his now empty hands continue moving continuously, as though he's chopping vegetables—it should be a personal habit of his when he talks. His gaze tells us how frenzied he is, his huge golden eyes moving left and right behind those thick lenses. I don't mean to look down on any YUTA^[1], though.

That white mold-like beard, especially, that covers his cheeks and chin, look awfully familiar...

"Ah!"

The man, who's finished a part of what he wants to say, jumps at the sound of my voice, and when he looks towards my direction for the first time he's so shocked he takes quite a few steps backwards.

“Ajira-san!?”

“Y-yujira-san...!?”^[2]

This man is the translator who attended the summit. That white mold beard that stands on end whenever he gets agitated is still the same. I remember clearly the nametag on his chest with the error: ‘Translator: Ajira’, but the third words seems to be horizontally inverted.

“Ah, I was right, no wonder you look so familiar.”

“Why is the translator... Why are you, who knows translation houjutsu, joining the underground resistance!?”

Surely he must be having the same thoughts as I am. Why is the idiotic guest who fell from the balcony here at the entrance to the underground maze!?

“Ajira may be a citizen, but he’s a great asset of ours. Because his grandparents’ generation were still slaves, all I gave him was a little suggestion. On that note, he’s here with intel, I think Your Majesty would be interested to know.”

“Listen?”

I pause for a while before I understand that he’s asking if I want to listen to the information. He has a way of abbreviating his common language, and he speaks as short and sweet as ever. Rather than saying he’s a special houjutsu user, it’s better to say he’s good at languages.

And I reply loudly, too—only in verbs.

“Listen, listen!”

“Tomorrow, daytime, execute.”

“...What does that mean?”

“It’s an execution, Your Majesty.”

Conrad replies in English with a tone that makes me feel uncomfortable. Hazel nods, as well.

“W-wait a sec, Conrad, no one would make a cold joke out of this, right? No one would be that crazy, right?”

"An execution means to sentence someone to death, Your Majesty. It's to make an example for us to see. In other words they choose some rebels who were caught, or pick a few unlucky winners from the returnees we mentioned just now..."

"T-they'll be killed?"

Hazel, who was listening at the side, has an expression of surprise that says, 'how can you still not understand the situation'.

"Don't the mazokus have corporal punishment? But this is still too sudden, what on earth happened? There haven't been public executions here for several years now. Especially after Yelshi ascended the throne, we were all still happy that his restrictions on us are so much looser than before. Could it be that he's changed his principles too, and decided to go the same way as his mother?"

Faced with the leader who says such scary things, I retort her agitatedly, even making to pull her collar.

"You'll save them, right? You will save them, right!?"

"Of course I want to, but... Just thinking that it might cost other lives, I can't make this decision easily."

"No way? Don't tell me you're going to just watch them die!?"

Hazel, with her expression still solemn, is shaken by the shoulders strongly by someone young enough to be her great-grandson, and finally Lord Weller can't bear to watch anymore, pulling me away from her.

"I know!"

This is a foreign organization's problem, it's not good for me to interfere too much. I just didn't think that I would lose my mind and threaten the other side.

"Of course I know! But I still feel... feel as though Saralegui must have influenced this."

"So what do you want to say? Even if the execution was Saralegui's idea, but we're still in Seisakoku, the one to make the decision is still Venera. We can't force them to save them, can we?"

Lord Weller says in a voice so calm I hate it. Even this simple brain of mine can

understand that, but I still can't control my childish emotions. I'm so angry I kick the ground that's been here for several centuries, bringing up a cloud of dust.

In the rebound of my emotions, I even say some things I shouldn't say,

"And from what position are you saying this, huh!?"

Even raising some questions I shouldn't raise.

"As my companion? Or... as Dai Shimaron's ambassador?"

After a long time, Lord Weller replies in a hoarse voice,

"...What kind of position do you wish me to be in?"

He even repeats the same thing, word for word, in the mazoku language,

"What kind of position does Your Majesty wish me to be in?"

I can't say a thing.

"Sorry for interrupting your conversation."

Looking at the paper slip Ajira the informant passes to her, Hazel cuts in our conversation without raising her head. Although I was the one who asked him the question first, I still heave a quiet sigh of relief. Thank goodness he didn't reply.

But that short sense of relief disappears without a trace at the next piece of information. Looking at that unique writing, like still shots of a bird flying, Hazel clenches her fist tightly.

"There's good news and bad news, which do you guys want to hear first?"

"Good..."

"Then I'll read out the good news first. This time there are five people unlucky enough to be pulled out, a lot fewer than usual."

How is that good news?

"But out of those five there are names that don't sound like shinzoku, I have to admit, it's two girls."

Hazel adds a simple comment in what sounds like a swearing tone,

"Well, that sucks bad."

References

1. ↑ Yuta are witches or prophetesses in areas like Okinawa, apparently.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryukyuan_religion#Yuta)
2. ↑ Again, will verify. One word changes from the line above, but I have no way of telling if it's a typo.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Terine-shan is enjoying the cruise trip.

Gliding over the surface of the sea, ‘Friends on the Sea’ isn’t shaking much, so it feels comfortable to ride. And Captain Mountain Range, who usually won’t let Terine-shan leave his lap, has started to leave the skull on a barrel like this to tan in the sun. No matter how much Terine-shan likes hanging out with the captain, the skull still doesn’t like to be restricted too much, so it’s a pretty good deal, having some alone time like this. Dazedly, Terine-shan figures that it’s because Terine-shan’s less reliant now, and that must be the influence of the sea.

Of course, staying in the sun too long is bad for the skin, but to a skull that has lived so long and seen so much, it doesn’t really matter even if Terine-shan goes completely black. That’s why Terine-shan never even dreamed that such a thing could be witnessed there. As for her (?) subconscious actions after that, whose fault could that be?

Lord von Bielefeld Wolfram is standing on the deck and building up a relationship with the goddess statue praying for a safe voyage.

It’s just that there are still remnants of seasickness on the corners of his mouth.

Wolfram’s seasickness still hasn’t been cured, even though he accepted the worst secret technique known to the mazoku, something like ‘Günter’s protection’. All that did was give him two days free of retching over the side. That’s why he can’t quite understand why he was forced to take that slightly revolting talisman with him in the first place.

“...And it’s made of hair, too...”

To put it the way Yuuri would, it would definitely be 100% pure fleece, and it

feels high quality too. But that's just saying 'fully Günter hair' in a foreign-sounding way.

He takes the little grey pouch of his pocket, letting the cursing tool sway in the sea breeze—swaying, and swaying, and swaying.

"What, you're not puking today?"

Technically he can't have been drawn here by the swaying pouch, but Adalbert walks over, all swaying on his feet too. He's still covered in muscles, but these days he seems somewhat tired. There are obvious bags under his eyes, and even those muscles, his pride and joy, seem to have wilted.

But Wolfram isn't exactly fond of him, so he's not the least bit concerned, even hmph-ing in displeasure. Besides, this fellow was an enemy of the mazoku not that long ago. Even if he's not feeling well because he's not used to the sea, there's no reason to worry about him.

Adalbert doesn't look angry at all, though, when he hands a packet of powdered medicine to Wolfram,

"Seasickness medicine, go ahead and eat it. It's human-made, but it may still help you."

"What? What are you saying? Just eat it yourself!"

"Me, eat this? You want me to it this seasickness medicine made of vampire bat eyeballs and poisonous frogs and rotten pears and merman lord scales all ground together? How could I!"

There's no way of telling if he's being nice or purposely being annoying. Adalbert grabs onto the railing and exerts his muscles, leaning out his body dangerously.



"I'm not seasick."

"Then what's wrong with you, why does your color look so bad? I'll tell you now, to get you onboard, we made a huge sacrifice! If the time comes and you can't perform because your body is too weak, I'll cut off each of those muscles of yours in order and throw them overboard!"

Seasickness makes one irritable. Surprisingly, though, Adalbert doesn't snort at his words, instead lowering his head dejectedly,

"I'd rather you throw me overboard..."

"W-what's the matter, Grantz? Has one of your screws come loose?"

"You won't understand it, this pain."

His gaze hollow, he looks out into the horizon and says,

"That voice is always echoing in my ears... A voice saying 'Father, Father', and making it a question, as though he's cocking his head and asking 'Father?'"

"W-w-w-w-w-w-w-what is that--!?"

Wolfram takes a few steps back,

"Not only did you betray the mazoku and side with the humans, you even had a child out of wedlock!? And of all things, you brought like a cute and innocent little girl onto the boat that's heading out to save Yuuri!?"

"Which part of my imitation was cute and innocent? You... you're rather badly sick."

Adalbert grabs his blonde hair with his strong hands, mumbling in despair,

"After living a hundred and fifty years, never did I think that the Poison Lady's venomous fangs would still reach me! I even thought I would be the only one to escape."

"I see, so it's something to do with Anissina?"

The pretty boy subconsciously nods in agreement. As long as Annissina is involved, even the scariest thing is no surprise. Although he has no idea how the muscleman suddenly got a daughter, but if it's related to the Poison Lady, then he'll just leave it at that.

"Instead of distancing yourself from your daughter, wouldn't it be nicer of she

likes you? Since it's your beloved daughter, then I have no choice, I'll just pretend I don't know she stowed away."

"W-why are you so sure I have a daughter!?"

Having gone completely into father mode, Wolfram can't hear a single thing anyone else says. Even if that's a guy he hates from the bottom of his heart, he's happy as long as he has a chance to show off Greta.

"Indeed, as a father, there's nothing like the way your child says 'Father?' As soon as you hear your child ask in that questioning way, no matter what it is, you'll just buy it for her. Oh, yeah, how old is your daughter?"

"H-how o-old? How many years old? Looks really old, but actually it's only thirty... four, five?"

"Five years old! Mine is already ten. In that case, as a father, I'm your senior."

"Hey, wait a sec! When did you become a father..."

Completely immersed in father mode, Wolfram can't care about anyone else's doubts. Even if it's a man with a butt-shaped chin, as long as he has a chance to boast about his beloved daughter, nothing else matters.

"Mn—Five years old is really quite young. I can just imagine Greta when she was five, she probably couldn't sleep without her stuffed toy. If she gets a custom-made toy, she should probably be very happy. I wonder, how about a yellow ducky?"

"Ducky..."

Would it work if he gave a yellow ducky to Maxine, his lower half wrapped up in a grass-woven carpet, sitting like a mermaid and yelling 'Father'? On the other hand he would really like to pull Wolfram into the room, and let him experience the 'Father Hell'.

"Since it's come to this, I might as well try my luck. All right, I'm using hypnosis houjutsu to try and fight the spell!"

"Hypnosis houjutsu?"

Wolfram reacts to that last word. It seems to have some alleviating effect on his seasickness.

"I've been wondering about this since forever. You're not a shinzoku or a human, so how did you learn houjutsu?"

The former Master Grantz narrows his blue eyes, his expression strange and asking, 'why the heck are you asking?'

"It's not something I can explain in a few words. I trained so hard to learn it, it almost made my chin split into a butt-shape."

"Your chin!? Weren't you born with that butt-shaped chin!?"

Urk... That's why he can't stand these greenhouse-bred pretty boys. Not only did he laugh out loud over such a cold joke, he even takes it seriously.

"If you or I were born with a butt-shape down there, that would probably be a misunderstanding. It's not like your brother was born frowning, was he?"

"No, he probably wasn't."

But a chin still isn't quite the same as wrinkles.

"More importantly, are there babies with a butt-shaped chin? Have you ever seen one?"

"Probably... not."

"Exactly! Get this memorized, a chin is just like abs, the more you trained them, the faster they split, and the more you get used to using them."

"Get used to a butt-shaped chin?"

Wolfram is reluctant, but he feels as though he learned something today, and so he nods. But he may have mistaken this place for some daddy parenting class or something, believing in his heart that a father with a daughter can't be a bad guy. If he's not quickly awoken from his father mode and reverted to normal, he will surely be in danger.

But what they don't know, is that their embarrassing conversation has been broadcast live across the world by all the kotsuhizoku.

Meanwhile, in the Blood Pledge Castle, Gwendal, Anissina and Greta, the trio

of large, medium and small, have connected the piece of ‘Happy-Happy Bone Puzzle’ into a huge soup spoon-shaped container, and are holding their breaths as they listen closely to the content coming across the intercom.

Though the content itself is nothing much to talk about.

“What do you think of this ‘Tingly-tingly YESYES Now Receiving Electric Waves’, abbreviated as ‘Tingly YES-kun’? With this, we can even live broadcast social meetings, duels to the death and so on through the bones, receiving any noise whatever it is. Mn--? Oh, dear.”

Anissina points her neatly-manicured nail towards ‘Tingly YES-kun’.

“Wolfram has been duped by the muscleman.”

The older brother holds his head with his long slender fingers, mumbling,

“Oh, little brother...”

Sitting on his lap, Greta tries her best to stretch her arms so she can pat Gwendal’s head.

“Good boy, good boy, Gwendal. Don’t cry—Greta knows, that no matter how you train, you can’t make your chin butt-shaped, just like how there aren’t any natural-born Poison Ladies in the world.”

“Lady von Wincott may have been a natural-born Poison Lady.”

Anissina’s careless words excite the young girl who fell in love with the Poison Lady in no more than five seconds.

“Eh, who’s that? Can Greta be that person’s student!?”

“Greta, we can discuss this again when you reach your zodiac year.”

“Eh—”

Greta makes a noise of dissatisfaction. Because there are a total of 577 types of animals in the Shin Makoku zodiac, so the chances of surviving to your next zodiac year aren’t that high.

“But Wolf’s simple and dumb-dumb part is where his beauty lies, y’know.”

“Oh, dear, Greta, if Wolfram heard you praise him like that, he would definitely jump with happiness. But I have to give it to His Majesty, scolding when

someone has to be scolded, praising when praise is deserved. He taught you well.”

“Yuuri wasn’t the one who said that--!”

“Then who is it?”

“Gi—sela--!”

The dejected Gwendal makes an indescribable wail.

“Oh dear, that Sergeant who always picked on strong sturdy men for her pleasure, has finally set her targets on men younger than her? How scary, how exciting. Aha, aha, ahahaha!”

Ahh~ My little brother, I weep for you.

No matter which world it is, the older brothers are feeling frustrated.

At the end of the death row name list, there are indeed names that don’t sound like shinzoku.

Jason and Freddy.

But I just can’t understand the words that look like flying birds, even if I try touching the words as I read. When I see the last two lines of words, the choking urge to cry surges suddenly up my throat.

I’ve been looking for you, for so, so long.

The other three are all men who returned from overseas, now held in the facility nearest to the capital. Hazel... No, Venera seems to know who they are by name alone. She presses her fist to her forehead, her eyes tightly shut.

Even so, she’s extremely wary of rescuing them. By nightfall, she still hasn’t decided on whether or not to take the risk. Even if they are friends so close to her heart it hurts.

Venera’s argument is that ‘they have long been mentally prepared for this’. When they decided to abandon their home country, boarding the boats seeking for a new world, they already prepared themselves for the worst. Everyone knew

the fate of those who fail, and the chances of success, before they left on the journey.

“The sad thing is, no one ever told Jason and Freddy these things.”

That’s right, those two just accepted help from a rookie like me, so they have no way of imagining what their future would be like.

“No one told them, ‘be mentally prepared’, because they have no idea at all what’s waiting for them. I made them believe that ‘as long as you return to the place you were born, you will have a happy future’, and then I just sent them back to Seisakoku. That’s basically a hoax, it’s no different from cheating them!”

“I understand what you’re trying to say, Your Majesty!”

“If so!”

“Even so, there’s no reason for us to make an exception this time.”

Hazel is always so calm, no matter what.

“Damn! Crap, I actually swore in front of a lady, I’m so sorry. Damn!”

I carefully put the drink they gave me back onto the ground, then leaving the room as I hammer the walls. After we were chased last time they have helped us, hidden us, even fed us, and I repay them with such an attitude. How unbelievably rude. The corridor I walk out into is lit everywhere, so I can somehow walk without needing a torch.

Josak and the other one... probably Conrad, are following me as well.

I walk down the opposite direction of the narrow path we came, and after a few minutes’ walk, the flames on the walls stop. I will never step into an area without torchlight, so that I don’t get lost in the darkness.

I stand on the borderline of the darkness and the human world, leading on the walls mixed with mud and rock. My right foot is in the darkness, but my left is in this world.

I don’t talk to anyone, my anxiety only evident in the sounds of my breathing. Josak speaks up nonchalantly.

“You’re definitely going to save them anyway, right?”

His voice is so calm, as though he's just asking me 'do you want to join the morning drills'.

"It's only five people anyway, if we set up an ambush or something it might work—of course, if it was only two, it'll be even easier."

"But we..."

I don't continue, looking at the two faces in the faint light. I can count you in this, right, Conrad? If my guess is right, and this is Saralegui's plan, then logically speaking the Dai Shimaron government would order you to stop it too.

"There are just the three of us, though? And one of them is me. Be it my batting ability or fighting ability, they're all zero... It's tough for me to knock out even an inner-field ground ball. Damn—if I go for base, we might still be safe, though."

In truth, it'll be faster if I put my all into a dash.

"I can't let Your Majesty walk into danger."

Conrad says with a sigh. There's even that 'I just knew this would happen' expression that I haven't seen for so long on his face.

"But I don't have the right to prevent you from going out there yourself... Regarding manpower, though, every country should have people who would do anything for money. As long as we use that properly, they may yet prove to be a useful asset. Ah, I know, don't worry."

Seeing the two of us from the Shin Makoku team with our 'we're broke' prose, Lord Weller thumps his chest,

"I can make an official claim."

"Dai Shimaron are so rich, aren't they~~ Young Master!"

"That's right, huh~~ Gurrier!"

Gurrier and I look at each other and joke.

"The problem now is the language."

Even if my English is fluent enough, my Seisakoku language won't do at all. In other words, it seems like my soul was never born as a shinzoku. On that note,

though, I'm not sure if shinzoku exist on that reincarnation recycling list the mazoku are always going on about.

"Join!"

Suddenly someone speaks up, and when I turn around I see Mr Translator with his thick lenses stand up, his face red. The white moss-like beard is standing up on end, reacting to his agitation.

"Join. One, cousin."

"One of them is your cousin? No wonder you were so concerned, Ajira-san... Oh, yeah, your parents were slaves as well, right?"

In that case we don't have to worry about the language anymore. Although we do have two experts here, in terms of numbers, we are still at a horrible disadvantage. But I can't just stand by and watch Freddy and Jason die because of that.

"Still, we must immediately stop the operation if it's deemed impossible to succeed. I hope you can understand that."

"Okay, but it will succeed."

My old habit is resurfacing again, that sense of self-confidence bubbling up from goodness knows where. Josak puts his hands behind his head, watching us deal happily, and raising his head to look at the ceiling barely above his head—though of course there aren't any stars there.

"Aaahh~~ I wonder, would they postpone the executions because of rain?"

If it were postponed due to rain, we would have time to practice our plans.

Unfortunately, the next day is sunny.

Even Ajira, the local, is rather impressed by the beautiful weather. There isn't a cloud in sight, and the sun is hanging high in the cold sky, so bright it's almost white. The wind that greets our cheeks may be bone-chillingly cold, but as winters go, the sunlight coming down is still rather warm. On that note, it's still

winter here in this country, and quite a while away from spring, it seems.

Standing in the middle of the capital, I can't feel the difference in citizen classes and the slavery system at all. All I see everywhere is beautiful streets and satisfied people. Everywhere, buildings of similar color and design, and people whose hair, eyes, and even most of their clothes are the same.

There are busy shops, old friends greeting each other with smiles, young couples leaning into each other, old couples helping each other out with the laundry, and children in the middle of happy families.

It's all too perfect.

Everything I see is too perfect, making me worry if I've been duped. Maybe the Seisakoku slaves and their torment is all a lie, and the truth is exactly what I'm seeing now. Maybe this is a land of peace where everyone lives happily. The flood of gold washes over me, spinning my head around.

But that thought immediately disappears without a trace. Because a child tumbles out of an alley, bumping into a beautifully-dressed woman's foot. What happens next takes less than three minutes, but has nothing to do with any paradise.

The child in the tattered clothes darts back into the dark alleys.

He's still bleeding.

Conrad, Josak and I all pray he can get away safely, apologizing to him profusely in our hearts, watching him leave wordlessly.

I'm obviously an outsider here, and to hide my hair and eyes, I wear a hat and lower my head, trying to blend into the crowd. In this land of nothing but white and gold, a foreigner stands out enough. If I make any rash movements, I'll definitely get even more attention.

Only a few foreigners dress like this. I mean, I'm lucky that there are a few merchants who came here from Dejima on business, so I don't stand out like a black chess piece in the white snow.

Regardless of the turbulence I feel inside, the street returns to normal nonchalantly. Maybe everyone's used to this. It just goes to show that these

things happen here all the time, and it's only natural to them. Maybe I'm the only one who would get so wound up by a little thing like this until I'm holding my breath and my throat is dry.

"Don't tell me that once it's time, all these people will just crowd over to witness the execution... Where's the location again?"

"In the central square, so they can make examples out of those few."

Josak's answer makes me tsk. If my mom were around, she would definitely scold me for being rude and flick my ear.

"In such an obvious place, too... That habit of yours is a bit too messed-up, Yelshi."

And your name sounds so much like the European Union, too. Wait, that's EU, right? Josak's right cheek is twitching now, as though trying to hold back his laughter.

"Young Master, why are you saying that even now? When you were in Van dar Via yourself, you were the mastermind who waved Mörgif around in the middle of the public. Now that was a public execution, complete with evidence. And just like today, the convict back then was a kid. The audience loved it and kept cheering, and wasn't there this gramps who got so excited he croaked? But that must have been because the Young Master totally lost it then, huh?"

"Is that so. God—That just proves that even if you give me a weapon, it's no different from peeing at a cat's ear!"

Putting it that way sounds like it might offend some animal rights' groups. How should I put it otherwise, though? "No different from feeding a cat"?

"I think they also say 'throwing a pig a ball'^[1]."

But no matter how exaggerated I may act, only I know the coward that I truly am, a coward who can't stand up to pressure, either. The truth is, I'm almost about overwhelmed by the unease and restlessness. I keep thinking, "What happens if we fail. No, this chances of this plan succeeding were never high. If we fail, will those two be executed in front of me? Can I just stand back and watch as Jason and Freddy are killed in front of me.

Although it sounds disgusting, if I don't crack some jokes to distract myself, I would probably be spewing out my guts right now. Luckily, I didn't eat breakfast, though we skipped it because we didn't have enough supplies. Right now, I'm starting to lose track of what being 'lucky' means.

As for Lord Weller and Translator – Ajira, they stepped away for a while to delegate the tasks to the newcomers. Maybe out of fear that he would be admonished later, Josak grabs my arm under the borrowed cape. He applies more force into his fingers, so I can clearly feel the heat of his fingertips.

"Are you angry?"

His face is turned towards the fountain, and he randomly throws down this question. The central square, soon to be a makeshift execution site, is two streets to the east of the brick slab road. Since all the buildings are scattered around an accurate radius, it's very easy to find our way.

"What would I be angry about? Why are you suddenly so serious, Gurrier?"

"Are you angry about what I did back then?"

"I don't have a reason to be mad at you, do I? You're always helping me out."

"That's not what I mean."

Maybe the designated time has come, because water starts spurting out of the tall stone pillars everywhere. The sun shines through, throwing little rainbows around. The girl who waited for ages in front of the fountain claps happily at the colorful images. I mumble, "And soon you'll be watching people die." How I hope your parents are decent people, who would come and take you home before the execution.

The spy stares at the spray of water everywhere, continuing after a while,

"I meant what happened in Van dar Via, my attitude and actions."

"Oh~~ You were pretty cold and sharp in the beginning, huh."

It feels as though that was years ago, but in truth not that much time has passed. If I count the Earth time, it's probably only around half a year. From that moment onwards, we started some conflicts with Shimaron, and our journey around the world.

"But that couldn't have been helped, either, since I wasn't trusted, was I. After all, a brat just shows up and says, 'I'm the king—', of course no one would believe that immediately."

Actually the situation hasn't changed much to this day. I always feel guilty for not being the talent they wanted, and maybe he caught on that guilt, because he continues stiffly,

"But still, that wasn't the way to treat a king. There's something you might not know—Actually I can read Shimaron words, and I knew all too well what kind of event that would be. But I still forced Your Majesty into the gladiator ring, so how is that any different from lying to you?"

So that's it! Well, I completely, utterly didn't notice that at all, but it's embarrassing if he knew that, so I just reply with a nod.

"That's more than enough to get me beheaded, it's just that mazoku sentences don't have beheading as an option. Whenever I think about that now, I feel so ashamed it's physically uncomfortable. I'm really... really very sorry."

"When it comes to embarrassment, let's call it a draw."

The fountain show ends after showing the people a temporary illusion. Now there's only a small steady trickle of water from the stone pillars, and the girl takes her mother's hand, walking towards the east of the road. Sigh~~ They went there after all.

"Anyway, that was my first impression."

The crowd starts slowly moving to the east.

"But now I rely on you a lot, you know? Especially this mission this time, I've been relying on you since we were in Shou Shimaron."

Even though we're aware that the people are moving, we're still standing in front of the fountain.

"And besides, since it's come to this, there's no reason for you to explain all this to me. In fact, your confession is kinda throwing me off-guard. Ah, could it be that you're saying considerate things to comfort me and lessen my worries?"

Thanks so much, Gurrier. I punch his buff biceps. Even through the clothing,

they have an enviable elasticity, the sound made by a punch rich and melodious.

Yup, even his body is full marks.

"That thing that my pops is always worried about, something like an 'Employee Grading Chart', if I was in charge of grading you, you would get A for everything. So there's no need to suddenly feel guilty for something in the past, kay? Ah, or were you scolded by Gwendal? If you were, I can help you explain."

"No, of course not~~ That person is an excellent boss, and never says anything to make me feel dejected."

"Or did Conrad...?"

"That traitor has no right to judge me. Ah, geez~~ Young Master, don't look so torn, or else Gurrier will be thrown off-guard too."

Normally he can adopt that onee-san tone naturally, but today his voice is full of self-condescension, and it's so rare to see him look shy. With the way the situation is spiraling, maybe a thunderstorm will start soon?

"I just wanted to apologize to you, and I thought that I just had to tell it to your face."

Josak looks really happy saying that, his gaze moving from the fountain to me.

"How wonderful, now I feel much more at ease."

"What do you mean by at ease, Josak?"

That orange fringe and half-hidden blue eyes peep out from underneath the grey hood. Even if I tell myself it's impossible, I still ask, slightly uneasily,



"You wouldn't be... going anywhere, would you?"

“Going where? I always have a lot of missions overseas, so I can’t always be by your side.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

I’m terrified that I may jinx things, so I don’t dare continue. If he were to disappear from my sight too, I really wouldn’t know who to call out to anymore.

“...I didn’t mean... It’s nothing...”

I rub my eyes with my fist.

“It’s nothing.”

“Young Master is so weird too—”

Josak releases my hand, chuckling with his back towards me. He’s really no different from usual, as cheerful as always, and even complaining, “If swords weren’t carried by your waist and instead strapped onto your back, it gets really hard to pull them out~~”

The music to announce the time starts up, and the people who were leisurely strolling starts striding towards the east in unison. Their destination is the square two streets away. There’s a special event to be held today, and no matter what it can’t be missed—The way the shinzoku citizens whisper is imprinted clearly into my mind.

“You brought that thing, right?”

I nod in lieu of a reply to Josak’s question, and sort of confirm whether the thing is on me, my sweat hands curling into fists. There’s the feeling of old paper and packets of powder between my fingers.

I will save you two.

I lower my voice, muttering to myself almost inaudibly.

I will definitely save you two.

References

1. ↑ Apparently the actual term is ‘throwing a pig a pearl’, which goes together with ‘giving a cat a gold coin’, meaning something futile and ill-thought of.

Chapter 6

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The methods of execution differ according to different places and people.

I think that, because the men ready to meet the end of their lives are standing on a hastily built wooden platform, facing the gallows and talking non-stop about their wills and how their property will be split. The crowds of spectators who can't all fit into the square are also discussing the heirs to their clothes and the slippers on their feet, as well as their wives' rights to remarry etcetera.

There's a human businessman nearby, with a translator beside him duly translating everything. While I'm desperately looking for Jason and Freddy, I hear all about who the bed without a leg will be given to. That's seriously enough, I don't care who his bed goes to, it has nothing to do with me even if his wife wants to remarry to someone ten years younger.

As for the second man, he starts loudly airing his grievances with the current government. The Seisakoku translator beside me naturally doesn't say that part, but the officials on the stage immediately stuff the man's mouth with something. I think the human businessman has an idea what's going on, too. When I look around at the women, their faces are all red and their brows furrowed.

Eh...? Could it be he was spewing dirty language?

The third man has guts.

His hands are tied behind him, and his expression doesn't change even with a rope around his neck. According to human years he would probably be forty-something years old, so thin you could clearly see the bones in his throat and arms. But it could also be that he's already sick, and so he can even face death without flinching.

Although it was built hastily, the wooden platform is still very tall and very sturdy. These pieces of wood are taller than everyone else, so no matter how the people below try to reach out, their hands can't reach the people being

executed. It's about six tatami mats wide, so even if there are six men of different backgrounds on it, there's still more than enough place.

Standing on the edge of the square, even further behind that most of the spectators, I stand on my tiptoes and try to look over their hands, desperately looking for Jason and Freddy, but I can't see anyone that looks like them on the entire stage. There are only those three men from about thirty to forty years old, and the rest are uniformed officials.

"I don't see them."

I thought they would be sent here a little later so I look at the escort carriage, but the coverless carriage is empty. "That's weird, I can't see them anywhere."

"Could it be a last minute cancellation?"

Josak has seen them before, but he can't find them now either. Maybe the afternoon sun is too blindingly bright, because he raises a hand over his eyes. Since all we see is a sea of almost-white blonde hair, it's unsurprising that he would find it piercing to the eyes.

"If those girls aren't being executed..."

The words I almost say next, 'that's be great', throw me into a panic. How could I think something so selfish and cruel! There are still three men about to be executed up there. If I only want to save the people I know, I'd be way too selfish, just thinking about it makes me hate myself.

"Now what, Young Master? Do we change our plans?"

There's a familiar song from above, drowning out Josak's question. The third man who didn't have any last words suddenly starts singing. It's the song that child who drew the star outside the palace and Hazel were humming. His voice is so loud it's almost inexplicable how that came from such a frail body. Although I don't understand the lyrics, the song permeates to every corner of the square, changing even the crowd's expressions.

Some of them look at each other uneasily, while others scrutinize the people around them in suspicion. I don't know what the lyrics mean, and why the people look so ruffled, but the voice of a slave due to die an unjust death has indeed messed up their hearts.

“I don’t want to change to plan, but...”

Time is of the essence here. If we wait until we can confirm if Jason and Freddy are here, we won’t be able to save the other three. Mr. Ajira and his relatives are also ready to cause a commotion and start the plan.

“Move faster...”

“Don’t worry, it hasn’t started yet. Shh! Don’t look back.”

“Vene... Grandma Hazel?”

The whispers coming from behind me are in English. Even if she lowers her voice and adopts a special way of talking, anyone from Earth would immediately know who it is.

“Before His Majesty the Emperor shows up, they won’t carry out the sentence. When the citizens and the people... not the slaves, of course, finish listening to His Majesty’s speech, that’s when the execution starts. They’ll be covered with a sack and hung—an old but effective method.”

Venera, also known as Hazel Graves, appears at my shoulder. My body is turned straight ahead, so I give her a sideways glance, and see that she’s wearing magnificent clothes completely different from yesterday, looking just like a rich old woman. That’s right, she doesn’t look like the leader of the slaves at all, instead she looks more like a normal citizen here to watch the show. Her smile is arrogant when she says,

“I have to put on an act to avoid suspicion, right? Why are you here, though, Your Majesty? Those two girls aren’t here, are they?”

“I was about to ask you why you’re here... Why did you overturn your decision this morning?”

“Early in the morning, Lord Weller came to convince me with empty hands.”

Empty hands!? Doesn’t he have a budget to use, why would he do that?

“He said he wanted my help. Actually he could have spent a ton to hire me, but instead he pleaded me with his head lowered. After hearing about it, my comrades decided to help out too. But I’ll say this ahead, ‘That man is rich, so take what you can take.’”

Venera says jokingly, even winking at me. Since the door to my memories was suddenly thrown open recently, I think to myself, how long has it been since someone sent me a flying kiss? Since I followed Dad to America for work, right? And how long has it been since she did that? But she looks really happy, so much so that even I can feel the excitement in her heart.

“Please don’t misunderstand. I’m not doing this out of pity, and I wasn’t moved by your passion, and I’m definitely not doing it because I can’t stand to watch children die. It’s just that I heard what Little Bu... His Majesty said, and thought that Jason and Freddy may be useful in the future, so I changed my mind. For a group like us who can’t use houjutsu, a helper with strong houjutsu is unbelievably precious. And...”

The wrinkles at the corners of those eyes deepen.

“Basically, the other three are all my cute companions.”

“Is that—so—?”

I follow her beat. I understand why she has to purposely say that, but now that it’s come to this, there’s no reason for her to act so cruel anymore.

“So that means you brought other helpers, huh...”

“Listen up, don’t look there! The vendor selling donuts, the guy selling sweets, the girl selling desserts are all with us.”

“W-why are they all sweet things?”

Suddenly, a completely different voice and song starts rustling up the crowd. Everyone raises their heads to look up, countless gazes fixed on the special path isolated with warning fences. They clench their fists and get ready to cheer, none of their expression bored, all of them excited, anticipating, ecstatic.

“He’s here.”

There’s even a sort of anticipation in Hazel’s voice, just none of that admiration and joy, more like the tension before a competition. I thought he would arrive in a shiny gold carriage, but instead he takes me completely by surprise. The young Seisakoku emperor enters the scene on a movable throne. In other words, he’s the VVIP. If you put it in the traditional way, it’s like a shrine

seat for the gods, if you say it more dreamily then it's like a float in a parade at the seaside theme park. The young emperor sits on the second level, surrounded by flowers and gold, even waving his right hand in a way that makes people impatient.

"...I'll hand it to you, as expected you're on a different level from me."

Even though the yells of 'between fingers' feels weird to me, but I still have to admire the other parts. Who would have thought that he could stay so calm sitting on top of a two-story high shrine pedestal, seems like his nerves really are made of something else.

Even if I have 2.0 vision, it's still impossible for me to see clearly at this distance. But today Yelshi seems to have tied his hair up behind his head, wearing light green clothes and a bright yellow belt. He waves at the excited people, speaking freely, replying to them with a happy expression. He seems a little different from how he was yesterday, but that could be because he has his official face and his personal expression.

There are two servants standing on either side of the emperor, and a large sack that looks suspicious no matter how you look at it behind the chair. If it's that size, they could easily fit two growing children inside. I suddenly feel as though the sack is moving, surprising me into blinking my eyes. Is it just me? Or is the vibration of the shrine seat causing the sack to sway?

I rub my eyes and look again. What, so it really is just me... No, it's moving again!

"Damn, if only we had the Shin Makoku Bird-watching Association's recommended ma-powered binoculars, 'Peeping Brat'!"

"The things that aren't there when you need them are the 'Queen's Inventions'; the things that disappear when you want them are truly good men, Young Master. This is how men learn how to compromise and give up. And people call this 'the rule of fine, whatever'."

"To me I can't just say fine, whatever and forget about it. Ah!"

In that moment I see long and white stick-like things underneath the sack, most likely their legs.

“Could it be that Jason and Freddy were late for some reason, so they were brought directly in the sack...”

“Bringing cute girls in a sack? Instead of Yelshi, that sounds more like something the previous Empress Alazon would do.”

A-la-zon?

“It’s the maze lady that was the previous empress, Yelshi’s mother. Just the sounds of it is really uncomfortable, huh? Feels as though it’s just one syllable different from something. But she is a cool and scary woman. During Alazon’s reign, my companions suffered cruel mistreatment. So when her son took over, all the slaves rejoiced.

Is she possessed by an evil genie or something?

“But that sack is moving.”

And just then, the operation began.

As expected, there was a small scale explosion near the west entrance to the square, exactly as we planned. With that signaling the beginning, there are many other small explosions in quick succession, and the people, at first excited to see their Emperor, start scurrying for safety in a panic. And we plan to take advantage of that chaos to approach the execution stage and release the captured slaves. Although it’s a simple and plain plan, it may have a higher chance of succeeding than the best-laid plans.

Hazel rushes over there too, keeping low. Josak and I are in charge of fanning the flames, so we quietly light the dynamite in our pockets and toss them into the trees.

“What should we do, Josak! The sack behind the Emperor...”

“Could it be the girls?”

I nod my head hard at my subordinate’s overly direct words. Just in case, I ask him what I should do next. My body is prepared to rush forth anytime.

“What do I do next?”

“Wait here, don’t move.”

"I thought so, it's just as I guessed. Then I'll just stay here and not move!"

But I plan on waiting until Conrad, Hazel and the others rescue the three poor men, then do my best to move forward and peek at situation up front. If I'm sure the ones in the sack aren't Jason and Freddy, then I can still make it back to position before the operation ends.

"Ooh, I just can't stand you—Young Master. After this you will have to stand by me and get scolded by Lord Weller too, okay!"

It takes a lot of effort just to fight against the crowd and reach the shrine seat up front. I sneak one glance, and see a slave dressed in civilian clothing beating up officials and soldiers, finally taking off the rope from a man's neck. Looks like everything's going fine over there.

Even though they have a duty to protect the Emperor, there are only half the people there were protecting Yelshi's VVIP seat. Maybe it's because of the unexpected attack, maybe he sent his men to help the executioners. I can't care about how I'm dressed anymore, crawling by the flower bed as I think, "Really, you guys, the criminals being broken free and an enemy stealthily approaching your Emperor, which is more serious?"

I just have to wind around the sides until I'm behind the obstructions, then it won't be too hard to grab the shrine seat, but the problem is what comes after that. I start crawling upwards like a frog, grateful for the many decorations that all act as footholds for me. But I still have a little inkling of a thought, wishing I was that certain red arachnid superhero. If so all I'd have to do is squirt silk from my palms, now how much easier would that be.

By the time I finally reach the second story, I take great care to make sure I'm not discovered, so all I dare do is peek around at eye-level. Now I can the soldier's feet, and the sack in front of them.

I stare at the sack intently—It's definitely moving. But it's not so exaggerated that I can see the movement from afar, just a slight shaking. From the gaps in the sack I can see thin pale feet.

"...As I thought, it's a person."

"It couldn't have been a lucky bag full of giant kitties, could it?"

Who knows?

Unlike me, the spy moves without hesitation.

Stealthily he jumps onto the second story, knocking down the soldiers then brutally beating down on them. And what he uses is the sword he was just complaining wouldn't come out of the sheath easily.

Picking up the grey sack without wasting another second, he lifts it up with one 'hah!'

That's when His Majesty the Emperor finally stands from his seat, getting ready to yell, "Guards, we have assassins!" I hurriedly crawl over to the VVIP seat, trying to deal with Yelshi since Josak's hands are all busy.

Should I cover his mouth? Or limit his movement? Crap, I didn't bring tape!

But not only doesn't Yelshi yell loudly, he even looks at me in my hat and says without hesitation,

"Hi, Yuuri."

His smile is like a blossoming rose, and he covers his mouth with a green sleeve.

"You're here, I just knew you would come."

A cold sweat breaks out on my back.

That face, that voice, those deep golden eyes, those clothes and accessories are just like everyone else, but he is...

"Could it be?"

I force out a hoarse sound, he is not Yelshi.

"You're Saralegui?"

The young Emperor of Seisakoku, Yelshi, could never speak the common language so fluently.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

It has been less than a day since I started a conflict with them.

It was only then that I knew, the Saralegui who had travelled with us and the Yelshi waiting for us in Seisakoku are brothers, and that was when I got caught in their schemes, was even forced into signing a document with my country's fate at stake—all this, not more than 24 hours ago.

"You are Saralegui!? Don't tell me you swapped places... What's happening here, why are you sitting on this country's imperial throne?"

Aside from those glasses that really suit him, the only difference between the brothers is their hair length and clothes. Other than that, it's just that the younger brother Yelshi looks more like a puppet, but that's still a mistakable difference.

So the one here isn't the Emperor of Seisakoku Yelshi, but the king of Shou Shimaron Saralegui. It's true that his acting skills could fool an entire crowd.

The little finger with the diamond ring I can't remove starts to hurt.

Calm down, the one who can control this ring is the little brother Yelshi, not the older Saralegui. Sara can't use houjutsu, that's why he was kicked out of the country he was born in. So the pain I feel know, must be a trick caused by my cowardly mentality.

"Your reaction is so exaggerated, Yuuri."

Saralegui shakes those extravagant sleeves and holds out his hands, looking just like his younger brother. That's right, this is what they mean by shinzoku.

"It's just a game, Yuuri. Since we're twins, of course we would want to swap places. Isn't that the fun of being born as identical twins? And besides, we haven't seen each other for more than ten years, can you blame us for wanting to play a little?"

"...So you're saying, executing someone is a game?"

"Maybe the person being executed faces certain death, but to the spectators, it counts as entertainment, doesn't it?"

Then why don't you go be the person being executed!

The evil young king's pretty face, the face that I hate all the way into my bones, smiles adorably as he looks down.

"Even though I'm the king of an entire country, I've never witnessed an execution up close before. That's why I accepted Yelshi's suggestion, to try being that spectator all the way up there once. My brother said he's seen countless executions since he was young anyway, and got tired of them long ago. Oh, right, isn't the one over there Lord Weller's guard—"

He lifts a neatly-manicured, sakura-shell fingernail at my spy,

"—Could you please put down that sack. Because in it, are female trainee officials from the palace."

"What!?"

Josak, who held himself down low so as not to be seen by the soldiers on the ground, puts the sack down before I yell out, and opens it up—inside are two unfamiliar girls. Except for their eye and hair color, there's nothing at all similar between them, much less enough to call them sisters.

"You tricked us?"

"What? What on earth are you saying, Yuuri? Whoever told you that the people you're looking for are in this sack? If they were, that would be really ridiculous misinformation! Too bad, you were fooled by whoever gave you that information."

Saralegui creases his pretty brows, looking sincerely sympathetic. No one told me that. It's just that I, as usual, jumped to conclusions and stubbornly went ahead with it, and as usual, I fell flat on my face. That's all.

If there was really a mole, then what about the news brought by our ally, Ajira? The date and times are all correct, the execution did indeed go on. If it wasn't for the explosions in the square directly underneath us, those three men would have long since lost their lives.

But I don't see those children anywhere here. Should I be glad they're not here.

"The names... in the namelist..."

"Oh, do you mean those children with those strange-for-shinzoku names?"

The young king who was once my travel companion, claps his hands in front of his slender chin.

"They're not here, y'know. They in a faraway facility, there was just not enough time to bring them here."

"What does this mean?"

Compared to Saralegui's voice, like the tinkling of silver bells, the sentence I squeeze out of gritted teeth makes me sound like the quintessential bad guy. If an unknowing third person saw us, they would probably confuse our roles.

"All I did was add the names I heard on the boat. I believed that if I did that, Yuuri, you would definitely come back."

Then he says, giggling, "You must never say the important things out too loud, y'know." Watching his idiotic prey fall into the trap just as he hoped, seems to be making him especially happy, huh.

"Yuuri, you came back after all, didn't you?"

I want nothing more than to slap his pale face, then scold him as harshly as I knew how. But I desperately press down the urge to grab his chest and shake him, demanding 'where are those two children', telling myself instead non-stop, 'he's not worth your punch'.

"Let's fall back!"

I obediently take Josak's suggestion. Looking down, I see the prisoners put own cloths that blend into their surroundings, already mixed into the panicked, escaping crowd, being supported by others on their way out. I even see Hazel and Conrad. How I managed to confirm so many things in such a short time is beyond me.

The spy doesn't wait for my reply, grabbing my hand and preparing to lift me. Just as I'm about to protest, and say that I can get down on my own—

A string of white flashes in the corner of my eyes, and Saralegui's voice, calling out to me, stops in mid-air.

"Yuu..."

He doesn't say the '-ri'.

This scene is familiar. Although my rational mind knows it's best if I don't look, it'll bring me nothing but trouble, so I must not look no matter what, but I never learn my lesson, and so I can't help but turn back to look.

An arrow is embedded in the middle of that pale green outfit.

It's exactly the same as that time. Only this time the target is extremely obvious, and the narrow never came close to me.

Faced with that terrifying trauma, I feel as though all the blood in my body has been sucked away by the ground. Someone else got shot by an arrow in front of me. Right beside me, hit by that most primitive weapon.

"...Wolf..."

No.

That's not Wolf.

I shake my head desperately, grabbing at my hair through the hood of the cloak. Hang in there, Shibuya Yuuri! Wolfram's not here, he can't be shot or hurt! Don't be afraid, the one they aimed for is Saralegui.

The casualty's steps are a little jarred, his legs set apart and unmoving, and he stubbornly tries to pull the arrow out. But he can't, so he tsks his tongue in anger. Looks like the wound isn't as dangerous as it looks. Subconsciously I dive at him, pressing his slender body to the ground.

"Don't just stand there, it's dangerous!? Someone wants your life here! Aaah, don't try to take it out!"

"Why? No one likes having such a hateful thing touching their bodies, right?"

"If it causes excessive bleeding..."

Saralegui doesn't hear a word I say, pushing me aside and pulling the intricate arrow out from his chest. The arrowhead is clean as a whistle, without even a

spot of blood on it. I feel as though he's showing off how lucky he is.

"Your Majesty, there's no need to save that kind of person, sheesh!"

Josak is splayed onto the ground, and he grabs my foot.

"But..."

There are buildings on every side of the square, so there's no way to determine which window the arrow came from. Not only that, there's the possibility of a second attack, so it's best to leave this place as soon as possible.

"But this guy knows where the girls are."

Gurrier glares at Saralegui, still holding the arrow, hatefully.

"Really...!"

He quickly grabs the empty sack, and roughly stuffs the thin boy king inside.

"Josak!?"

He moves his jaw, tossing the sack over his shoulder,

"Later you must be my witness, I didn't support this! Okay, let's go!"

I look backwards as I'm climbing down from the shrine seat, just in time to see a heavily-armed group standing out like sore thumbs against the afternoon square come towards us. But the faces on those leading the march, don't look that of beings living in this world, almost causing me to lose my grip on the ladder.

"...Corpses?"

They're called zombies, or the living dead, etcetera etcetera. But they look the same, like malfunctioning radios or nearly rotting human bodies. With weapons in their hands and armor over their bodies, in a way they fit really well in a fantasy world of magic. No, wait, they seem to show up around 21st century London, too.

"It's corpses, rotting corpses are dressed in armor and moving around!"

"How can that be? Really, Young Master, please try to make jokes that men would appreciate too. We don't have nasty creatures like that even in Shin Makoku!"

Skeletons are everywhere, though.

“But really...”

“No buts, please pretend you didn’t see anything, for Gurrier.”

“I-if you say so.”

When my feet step away from the final rung and back onto solid ground, I finally heave a sigh of relief. Only then do I notice that I haven’t breathed properly until then. In order to run to the meeting spot, I take in a lungful of air, and find that there really is a smell of rot there.

Looks like something happened.

In a place we don’t know, something definitely happened.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

As soon as he found out what's inside the sack, Lord Weller is shocked into silence. Even he couldn't have expected something like this would happen.

"I really shouldn't have asked..."

He pulls his fringe upwards, his hand, calloused from his time with a sword, touching the scar on his right eyebrow. This is my first time seeing his 'how on earth could this be' expression.

"Josak, weren't you with him? How could this happen?"

Conrad glares at Josak hard, and the latter hides behind me,

"You promised, Young Master, explain for me please."

"Mn, anyway—This wasn't Gurrier's decision, it was mine."

Before he hears me out completely, Conrad does something surprising.

He opens the sack to certain extent, stuffs something into Saralegui's mouth before he can make a sound, and then re-ties the part he opened tightly.

"C-Conrad?"

For someone like him, who was always steady in his actions and a supporter of human rights, this is really an unbelievable act of violence.

I'm petrified because I thought he flew off the handle, but Conrad replies me with his usual good-looking, nice guy smile, only his eyes aren't smiling.

"Just pretend this never happened."

"How can I? I was the one who asked Josak to do this, because Sara knows where Jason and Freddy are."

"Even so, we can't let them know."

Conrad looks past my shoulder to Venera and her companions. A shadow flits across those silver-shining eyes.

"He looks no different from Yelshi, and not many people know Yelshi's older twin brother is here to visit. More importantly, if he remembers what they look like and this location, we may bring them trouble."

He's right.

Maybe Yelshi heard of this underground city that was destroyed by the previous emperors before, but the current ruling party probably doesn't know the names and faces of the people here. Especially the ones helping from inside the city, they're dead if Sara sees them. Not only won't they work as spies anymore, their very lives may be in danger.

If Hazel's words are true, then the person who attacked Sara, isn't one of hers.

From the very start, most people thought the one sitting on the portable VIP seat is Yelshi. So the target wasn't Saralegui, but His Majesty Yelshi. This is a bona fide botched assassination attempt.

She and her protest companions never wished to solve this with violence. They can't imagine the country's systems changing drastically just with an emperor's death, so they would rather let the world know their suffering and wait for the interference of international forces. If there are people among them who want to resolve it with violence, they probably wouldn't send boats out to a paradise they never know they can reach, and instead would use the sheer numbers of the slaves and start an armed revolution.

Although it sounds bloody saying this, but farming tools can become weapons too.

Hazel's explanation makes a lot of sense and sounds trustworthy, but after that reply she added an interesting line,

"Looks like the target is either the older brother or the younger."

I'm not sure either.

We've returned to the underground passage Hazel brought us through yesterday, and by the time we walked about half of it and confirmed that our pursuers have been thrown off, we finally heave a sigh of relief. As for the three people who dodged the bullet by a hair, they're hugged by each of their companions in turn, not at all bothering to hide their happy tears.

Although those two children aren't here, we still wave away the disappointment in our minds and sincerely wish those who were saved, happy to have helped.

But at the same time it feels like we brought back a new fuse.

"In that case, we just have to get the relevant information out of him, then leave him together the sack somewhere... Really."

He sighs as he suggests the method that sounds like disposing non-burnable garbage,

"Really, you guys actually kidnapped the king of a country, and stuffed him in a sack."

If it was Günter, he would definitely have started squirting Gun-juices and howling left and right. A smile starts slowly at the edges of Conrad's mouth, and he ends up laughing, forcing down the sound in his throat.

"B-but you've gotten gutsier with these things, huh."

"Don't laugh, I'm very serious here."

"Sorry, but—"

At the end he finally laughs out loud, bending over. I know it's been a long time since he laughed like this, so happy I could make him laugh.

"How could you. The one who stuffed him in there wasn't me, it was Gurrier, y'know!"

"Ah, you did push the blame onto Gurrier after all! But it sure feels good, doesn't it?"

The spy narrows his eyes, seeking our agreement. After all since leaving Shou Shimaron, we've gone through all kinds of suffering tanks to Saralegui. If I listed them all, it would probably be more than a book. Just the way I was brought to Seisakoku, is no different from a large scale kidnapping. Although the idea of "payback" is a little against my morals, but I still want to act cool and say it in English.

Revenge.

Putting it that way seems more acceptable.

Finally getting his laughter under control with tremendous effort, Conrad pokes the sack as he says,

"Those three never heard Jason and Freddy's names before. They were all isolated in the facility nearest to the capital, it seems like they were brought here when the execution was suddenly decoded, so they're not too clear about the people in the other facilities. But it's not hard to imagine that the environments there are all terrible. As for what kind of situation they're in... I really can't say it."

"What a hateful topic."

I poke at the sack too, as I nod my head in reply.

"Just thinking about such little children staying in that kind of place makes me upset, hurts me. They're about the same age as Greta, after all. Although that daughter of mine... did cause some trouble of her own."

"Alright~~ Then shall we force this fella to spill it in place of his younger brother?"

Josak kicks the sack until it's a distance away. Now this is a little too much.



"Don't be like that, that's too much. If you do that, it's called abusing a prisoner of war. Putting aside the matters of Shou Shimaron for now, when it comes to Seisakoku, the responsibility isn't on Sara."

The childhood friends duo have perfectly matching looks of surprise,

"He's the guy who tried to kill you twice!"

"But he didn't get to kill me either time, did he?"

Although if there's one there will always be another, maybe only God will know if he will succeed the third time. But it's thanks to his failing twice, that reduced my low self-esteem by half. Saralegui, who received the highest quality education since young, studied how to be king, was born to be king, such a perfect young man actually couldn't manage to kill me, the normal high school student who likes baseball, twice.

It makes me think, the king of Shou Shimaron isn't all that impressive either, huh.

And it also proves that before tragedy strikes, no one can know if bad may turn to good by some factor.

"The only thing I can't forgive him for is that incident with Lord von Bielefeld... Yeah, give him a kick anyway."

I'll leave something like that to the older brother, then.

Having escaped from the city we have nowhere else to go, so we can only camp in the red room Hazel brought us to last night. Even though the floor of the underground city is cold and hard, it's still enough for us to rest our battle-weary bodies. After all we're fugitives from another country, as long as we have a dry place to escape the elements, we should be grateful for their hospitality.

Thankfully it's warmer underground than the windy surface at night, and we don't have to worry about soldiers spotting us even if we start a fire here. All that they'll see is little wisps of smoke from the ventilation opening quite a distance away.

After we borrowed a piece of cloth they call a sleeping bag but looks more like a carpet, the three of us lie down around the fire. Since the possibility of us being

found by the soldiers is really slim, there's no need to stand guard. For a life on the run, this is a pretty good start.

When I hear two sets rhythmic breathing beside me and confirm that Conrad and Josak are both asleep, I try my best not to wake them, moving away from where I'm supposed to sleep stealthily. Tiptoeing to the sack, Saralegui must be asleep inside, since the sack isn't budging at all.

"...Saralegui?"

Carefully I open the sack. Who would have thought Conrad tied it pretty tightly, too.

"Sorry, you must be freezing, huh."

I keep the sack open to the barest minimum, then stuff something that looks like a dusty carpet inside. As someone who was raised in a palace, I bet he can't stand this kind of thing, so I'll take this chance to add a common folk experience to his royal education. Although this has nothing to do with me, who grew up in Japan: population around one million...

At the same time I took the thing stuffed in his mouth out. Hazel and the others have gone back to their respective rooms, so I don't have to worry about them finding out what's in the sack. And no matter how loud he yells, the sound wouldn't reach the surface.

"Pwha, ha—"

"Shh—Quiet, the other two are asleep."

I put my finger on my lips. When I approach him with the torch, Saralegui is hugging his knees tiredly, curled up like a fetus. Out of pity, I pull down the sack and free his top half.

"Saralegui—"

"Your men are just too much."

The boy king straightens up his body, putting his thin arms on his waist.

"Kicked me real hard."

"I apologize for that. But we... don't have a good impression of you, you should

know that, right?”

“But, that was really too much.”

He doesn’t take his own actions into account at all, just kept repeating “too much” again, then reaching out his fair fingers to pull the hair out of his face. His previously immaculate hair is all over the place. I ask him if he needs his glasses, then only I remember that his glasses aren’t for correcting his vision.

“I’ll get you back into the city as soon as possible, well, to be precise I’ll leave you somewhere near the palace, maybe even the exact middle of the fountain. Don’t worry, you’ll be found really soon. After all, a guest suddenly disappeared, and he’s the Emperor’s own older brother, too, so that should have caused a commotion. For all we know, there are already a bunch of search parties on the streets looking for you.”

“Really?”

The boy king of Shou Shimaron cocks his head, looking lost. If it was someone who didn’t know his true nature, there’s probably a seventy percent chance his actions would awaken their maternal instinct, and that goes for men and women too.

“Even if I am a guest, I was also nearly assassinated y’know?”

“You don’t know who’s after you?”

Whenever he shakes his head, that almost-white golden hair will sway at will.

“I don’t know, I’m not that well-known in this country. I really can’t figure out who would try to assassinate me with a long-range attack that has a low success rate. If it was a political enemy from my own country, though, I could name a few right now.”

“But something like this sure is depressing...”

That’s right, Saralegui was just attacked at the war port named after him. And that man was one of his confidantes, too, even known once as the Shou Shimaron king’s loyal dog. Back then Wolfram was wearing his hooded cape, and nearly died in his place. Just thinking of that moment makes me shudder in fear.

“Maybe the person they want to kill isn’t me.”

“Eh...”

“That should make more sense, Yuuri. This is Yelshi’s country, not mine. That’s why the person who should logically be at that square and that event, is that emperor younger of mine. Besides, no one knows that I swapped places with him, and the two of us look like we were cast from the same mold anyway. Even you, who is so close to me, if I didn’t say anything, you can’t tell the difference either, right?”

“Me, c-close to you?”

I’m shocked speechless. So in Saralegui’s dictionary, a relationship of cruelly killing and hating each other is interpreted as ‘closeness’? What a hard to understand dictionary.

But he noticed that he may have become his brother’s scapegoat. After all, Saralegui is an egotist, so it’s impossible that he never thought of that possibility.

“Who would have thought that even Yelshi, with the way he is, has more than a few enemies himself... But it’s no wonder. After all, he is the leader of a country... Since he has so much land and so many people, if there are friends who admire him, there would surely also be enemies with something against him. Yuuri, the same goes for you, right?”

“Eh? About that, I—don’t really know—maybe, probably—”

He suddenly throws the question at me catching me off guard. More than once, Saralegui has talked to me on the conditions that we’re both kings. It’s just that his position is way too different from mine, in most situations I’m unable to be honest and agree. Even the simple fact that I have to be aware of danger from my political enemies is still something really far away for the me right now.

On the contrary, the people I consider dangerous, are Shou Shimaron and its leader.

And the person who currently tops my “Danger! People to Pay Special Attention to” list, is standing right in front of me, half his body in a sack. Japan... No, most countries have a “make full use of what you have” saying, right? If I can fully make use of this pretty boy king, who looks and thinks so differently from me, to solve all the problems, then it’d be worth letting Josak carrying him all

over the place.

“You’re right now thinking of how to use me, aren’t you?”

Once again, I’m lost for words.

Those who are good at strategizing must also be able to sense other people’s thoughts. For some reason, Saralegui asks me this question happily, but maybe it’s the torchlight reddening his face, causing me to misunderstand.

“You are planning to use my safe return as a condition, and rewrite that contract, aren’t you?”

“How can I use you as a hostage?”

“Don’t you want to use me as a hostage?”

His expression is one of sincere surprise. Is he someone who will follow obediently when his life is treated as an object? Or is he used to situations like this, having been raised since young as a crown prince?

“I always thought you caught me to get hold of the Seisakoku Emperor’s weakness! And there I was hoping I could see your expression of shock and panic when Yelshi unexpectedly rejects you heartlessly at close range too!”

“What are you saying!? And after I saved you? No matter what you think, technically I still saved you, you know... Wait, you said I’ll be rejected? You are the current emperor’s own older brother, how can he heartlessly reject me?”

I have never heard of such a strange kidnapping. Of course, this isn’t a kidnapping.

“Of course he can. Especially if Mother interferes, the chances of them leaving me to die are exceptionally high. Because Mother detests me, if I were saved, it would actually go against her hopes.”

He smiles as he says “she may even feel this is a good way to get rid of a problem”, not in the slightest bit lonely.

“She wants to see you in trouble? How can that be, you’re her son!”

“Yuuri, in this world, there are still parents who treat their children heartlessly, and vice versa. That applies perfectly well to us.”

I sag my shoulders, giving up on persuading him. Just as the muscles on my neck relax, there's a cramping pain.

"A relationship begotten by holding someone hostage won't last long."

"Is that so? If it was me, I would make it well worth it. Oh, dear..."

He touches my right hand. Instinctively I want to pull back, but can't because he holds on to with surprising strength. Saralegui grabs my pinky and holds it up against the firelight,

"I gave this to you, you still haven't taken it off? And I thought you chopped off your finger ages ago."

"Don't be full of yourself, that's my finger you're talking about."

The fingernail, manicured until it looks like a cherry-colored shell, reaches out lightly for the intricate ring of the same color, as though wanting to confirm the surface with rose vines and quite a few suns carved into it. Goosebumps start rising on the inner side of my arm.

"Do you know what kind of thoughts Mother put into this ring?"

How would I know, it's not like I can read the words carved inside, For all I know there'll be a mechanism that shoots out a poisonous needle when I come close to figuring what it means. So I say what I normally saw on Mom's mail order catalogs. Although this is different from those long-distance romances, but the emotions behind it should be the same. And though this sounds really clichéd, it's still very moving.

"...Could it be 'even though we're apart, our hearts are still together'?"

"Yuuri, you're really very cute!"

Saralegui suddenly hugs me. He was always a teenage boy with an obsession with skin contact, and even though he has a perfect target in his little brother now, it seems he still can't change his habit of hugging others. Behind the campfire there's the clanging of metal. It's probably Conrad or Josak, or maybe the both of them putting their hands on their swords at the same time. He obviously heard them, but he still purposely hugs my neck, saying quietly by my ear,

"That's a curse, y'know!"

All that waits there, is a door of endless darkness.

"On it is what Mother said. It's a warning for me to never again approach this country, this continent, it's an extremely powerful curse."

"And you made me wear this kind of ring!"

I push Saralegui away hurriedly, pulling my right hand back.

"That's why I told you to take it off."

"You... Someone like you..."

I swallow the words that almost left my mouth, "I really shouldn't have saved you back then". I saved him back then with a purpose, didn't I? In the interests of a calm conversation with him, I stay a fixed distance away from him, and sit down.

"Just like I said, I didn't catch you to hold you hostage; neither do I want to ambush Shou Shimaron while their king is away; I don't even want you to take you out of the equation, and talk straight to Yelshi. I need to tell you all of the above. I only want to ask you one thing."

He cocks his head, his expression saying 'What~ is it?', his uncombed hair sticking to his slender chin.

"Tell me about the two girls, Jason and Freddy. I heard that they weren't held at a facility near the capital, right? So that you could... to me..."

I simply can't understand what he would have those thoughts.

"So you could lure me out?"

"That's right."

"You overheard on the boat?"

"Uh-huh. Because you seemed very concerned about those girls, so I thought that you would show up once you heard their names, and this is faster, more practical than sending out search parties for you. And in reality... it's exactly as I thought."

"Aah, dammit!"

One must be careful in life. Not only must we always observe our surroundings, we must also be careful to never bring attention to ourselves, that's the smartest means of survival. As for me, even my mind is always moving at top speed, and that's the secret behind me being an eternal benchwarmer.

"It's just that everything went too smoothly, which took some of the fun out of things, but still, I'm very grateful to those girls who I only know by name."

"Please show your appreciation in your actions! I want to save them. Yelshi should know which facility they're in, right? Please tell me! You just have to tell me the location, I'll get them out of there. This time I'll go there myself. Those two must be held in some facility, it's just that we missed it."

"I didn't ask for too many details."

Maybe taken aback by my attitude, Saralegui backs away from me almost imperceptibly,

"Yelshi's men mentioned once, children and healthy young people are mostly sent to the furthest north of the continent, the facility on the other side of the desert. Because the natural environment there is harsh, even the fittest young men can't escape. But rumor has it that the horseback tribes in that area will take those with strong houjutsu by force, and then use them as cheap labor. How scary~"

I can't tell what scary means anymore, and who the real enemy is.

I remember Hazel mentioned the horseback tribes before too. Not only do they have land given to them by the emperor, they even use protecting the tombs as an excuse to ignore orders from the central government. It's hard to believe that even Seisakoku, the country people call stable as a rock, doesn't have full authority over all their land. Once I go deep into it, I find that everyone has their own problems.

"Since those two are healthy and still children, and they have strong houjutsu too, there's a high chance they were sent to the other end of the desert, the northern part of the continent."

The places Hazel pointed out to us did include a facility in the north. I remember the term 'horseback tribes' also came up at that point. Besides that,

didn't she say something else was really important? Something about tombs. Once a treasure hunter, she flew here from Earth, and ironically, found herself in the royal mausoleum or something...

She said she came with a Box.

"...It's in the same direction, huh."

"What? Same direction as what?"

"Nothing, Sara. Sara, thanks for telling me all this, now I can go look for those two children, thank you so much."

To avoid him getting any more suspicious, I hastily thank him. Because no matter what, I must not let him know anything about the Boxes. It's way too dangerous to let any Boxes in this land in the hands of the Shou Shimaron king, since he once made a terrifying mistake. Although that was the result of Maxine's own actions, but the superior has to bear responsibility for his men's mistakes. I cannot guarantee the same thing won't happen again.

"Are you cold? I can bring my carpet..."

Just as I'm about to say 'and lend it to you', I can't help but stop my actions and my words. Because there seems to be a ruckus in the distance. It's a bit like the loud and firm sound of army boots on dry land. In other words, they're footprints.

Seems like someone infiltrated the underground tunnels, and it's not just a couple of them either, but enough to make the ground shake with sound and tremble.

"Con..."

Before I make a sound, those two are already on their feet with their swords in their hands, and immediately light up the torches. I'm extremely certain they were awake from the start.

"Is it the pursuers?"

"If it is, who are they pursuing?"

The death roll prisoners that were rescued aren't here, and the mastermind Venera as well as translator Ajira have long since returned to their respective

bases.

So the highest likelihood would be they're after the kidnappers who took Saralegui. In this case, those kidnappers would naturally be us.

"You have a transmitter on you!?"

"Transmitter? What is that? A new crop from your country?"

Looks like Saralegui doesn't have anyone like the Poison Lady with him. Shou Shimaron is not a country that would invent meaningless things.

"Ahh~~ Now what do we do? We didn't kidnap him, it'd be better to say we saved him. Although it was a bit much to stuff him in a sack, but we had no intention of holding him for ransom or holding him hostage!"

I grab my hair forcefully, pacing nervously between them. Josak on the other hand has his sword out and ready for a while now, while Conrad is carefully listening to the footsteps, trying to estimate how many of them are there.

"All we can do now is get ready for a face-on confrontation."

"Just hold on a sec, Gurrier, this is a misunderstanding, you know? We've been wrongfully accused, right!? I don't want us to have any casualties, but I'll feel bad if they get hurt too, okay!? So that's why I'm reacting like this, looking desperately for the best excuse!"

"How about I go talk to them?"

Sara finally can't stand it anymore, and raises a hand.

"Just bring me to the person in charge, and I'll help you guys explain that this is not a kidnapping, how's that?"

"H-how are you going to explain?"

Saralegui replies nonchalantly,

"I'll just go out on my own. I'm afraid they'll barge in and cause danger, so you guys just stay in this room. Then at least my movements won't be restricted like a hostage, and it's better than sitting here in a sack, right?"

It makes sense when he puts it that way, but it's still hard to believe anything he says. It's very likely that he'll throw his arms around the enemy leader as soon

as he's out there and cry, "I was kidnapped, and the way they treated me was so scary, so scary—Quick, the kidnappers are hiding in this room, quickly go and catch them." And then hand us over to them. Don't say it's not possible, in fact there should be a fifty percent chance of this happening.

Even so, I still use all my strength to pull open the stone door, and then shove hard on Saralegui's back. Harboring thoughts like 'I'll definitely be cheated again', I sigh and close the door with Josak's help. And in the end--

"Open the door! Open the door, Yuuri, I'm begging you! Open the door now!"

I hear Sarlegui's scream, who knows what happened behind the door. He seems to be kicking the thick stone door, which won't budge no matter how you knock on it.

"Open the door, please open the door and let me in!"

"No way. How many more times do you want to trick me before you're happy? Hurry up and explain to them, tell them we didn't kidnap you!"

"No! These people aren't here to save me! Open the door, hurry up and open the door and let me in! I'm begging you, Yuuri, I'll be killed!" I've been played by his acting so many times. No matter how realistic he's acting, I can't believe him at all. Once I open this stone door, Seisakoku soldiers will rush in like an avalanche, take defenseless old me first, then use me as a hostage so that Conrad and Josak cannot resist, finally...

"I'll be killed, Yuuri!

I'm taken aback by the desperation in Sara's voice, turning around to look at my left and right protectors. One of them says it's still best to not let him in, and the other is expressionless.

The one with the poker face is Conrad, his finger on his chin as he mutters,

"The soldiers would kill the Shou Shimaron king without hesitation, the current Emperor's own older brother Saralegui... this country, what on earth..."

And as a result I never heard what he said at the end, putting my all into pushing the stone door open, because weak little Saralegui could never open it on his own. I open the door just wide enough for someone to come in, and then

reach out to grab Saralegui's slender white arm.

"Hurry!"

An odor like sulfur floats in through the cracks, exactly like the smell from earlier in the day. From the looks of things, the things chasing after us so relentlessly are more than likely the same as the ones from earlier, living things that don't exist in this world.

"What did you see!?"

Maybe the trauma was too much, because Saralegui's eyes are wide and his bloodless lips shaking. But annoyingly, once he holds his throat and catches his breath, he immediately turns back into regular Saralegui.

"Those aren't humans. Those things approaching us step by step, none of them are human. Although they're walking on their two legs, but how do I say this?"

"Their bodies are rotting?"

"Yes, that's it!"

The moment we have to meet that new species we don't even want to look at, is waiting for us.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

The corpses have started fighting my friends! Outside of a game, this scene makes no sense.

But the more often I come to this world, the more I feel nothing is impossible here. Like skeletons flying in the sky, tuna growing legs, pandas staying in the desert, etc. Although I can get used to nearly-extinct dragons, I still can't stand zombies. I can't stand the undead, and if they're rotting corpses, thanks but no thanks.

It's because their hearts have stopped moving. Just looking at that unhealthy skin color tells me their blood isn't circulating properly. And yet, in that state, why do they still have lightning speed? And can tell the difference between friend and foe? Even if you want me to believe this is something biology cannot explain, it's hard for me to believe you now that I'm at this age. Because my mind has stiffened up.

If you tell me these aren't corpses, but some people infected by a special virus, then maybe you could convince me. But these are corpses, after all, not patients 28 days after being infected^[1].

"Josak, they should be dead, right?"

"Mn, they should be. And they should have died at least a year ago, maybe even longer. The fermentation is coming along quite nicely~" "Then why can they still move at a normal speed? H-how are their nerve impulses transmitted!?"

"That I don't know. The advancement of corpses changes with every day, maybe their functions have developed fairly well? Right, Lord Weller? Ah, the leg broke."

"I'm not sure, either. After all, the last time I fought these fellas was almost 25 years ago, so they may have evolved a little."

It sounds like a conversation between IT tech people. On the other hand, so

they've fought these things before, I knew it.

The hands-on combat with the resurrected group I'll hand over to those two veterans, and as the combat rookie I have to figure out a way to get out of here. The only exit, the stone door has been smashed to pieces and taken over by the resurrected group with their agile weapons. The enemy density in the room is off the charts, so much so that I can't tell how many of them are there.

And they won't die. No matter how those two alleged Shin Makoku masters kill them, the carcasses will gather and just stand up again. Since I'm worrying at the side as I watch, I find that the dead people's weakness isn't the head, but the legs. Because once they lose their legs, their speed will drop tremendously.

For some reason, I have that feeling after an entire night of playing video games, because by now I'm numb to terror. Even so, I haven't gotten used to death, it's just that it's really hard to feel pity for people who are long dead. Watching them lose their arms and legs, and still try to stand and attack us, I can only describe this as 'so annoying', but the scene in front of me now is really comedic. Crap! Is this the so-called game brain [2]!?

It's just that Saralegui, who doesn't live in the era of video games, reacts differently. He's crouching in a corner, his body curled up as he holds his head.



"Are you okay, Sara?"

"...Mother, she..."

"What are you saying, you want to go back to your mama!?"

"Yelshi said, Mother isn't feeling well... But..."

"What!? So one of those zombies is your mother!? You better point her out quickly then, what if they hit her by accident?"

No matter how you put it, maybe it's Saralegui who got it wrong in his panic, because corpses can't have kids. But just the fact that the selfish boy king is actually scared out of his wits, seems to say that he has some psychological trauma about zombies. Like maybe he had a scary encounter as a kid, or was forced to babysit zombies during his summer break.

"Anyway just sit here quietly! At the very least don't be a burden to Josak and the others!"

I'm not familiar with swordsmanship or horse-riding, but even if I'm an idiot when it comes to fighting, I still picked up some of the most important sword-fighting principles and basic self-defense. For example, leaning on a wall will reduce the risk of being slashed from the back.

Still, even if I won't get slashed, there's still the occasional possibility of a weapon piercing through the wall. That's why, if the wall isn't thick enough, you have to pay special attention. On this point alone, this wall scores full marks. Its thickness and weight both seem more than sufficient.

"I just hope leaning on it won't cause the wall drawings to imprint on my clothes... Waa!" The two of us leaning against the wall yell out in unison. Not because we're attacked from behind, but because the wall has slanted on its own accord.

"...T-the wall, slanted."

Falling onto my butt, I turn around and see that part of the wall is leaning inwards like a rotating door, beyond which is a span of absolute darkness. Goodness, it's just like a secret mechanism. Perhaps out of shock, Saralegui is also staring at the movable wall with his eyes wide and jaw hanging.

“What is this, there’s no end to them!”

Josak, who rarely makes such a loud fuss, starts yelling.

“What on earth is the expiry date on these things!? Just how many times must we cut ‘em for them to just die already?”

“Unless we defeat the one controlling them, there’s nothing we can do to them. These things don’t have a consciousness,”

“If so, where’s their leader—pull him out and get rid of him already!”

“If I knew I would have done that a long time ago.”

Lord Weller slashes with his sword, and so one of the resurrected team’s heads fly into the sky, splattering a foul-smelling liquid as it went, finally landing by my feet.

“Sorry.”

“I-it’s okay, it’s okay—”

I say it’s okay, but my quivering voice can’t hide how shaken up I am inside. Having heard our conversation, Saralegui tries to avoid those undead, swaying unsteadily towards the wall.

“Sara!”

Hazel’s persistent advice from back then flits across my mind.

“No, you can’t go in there!”

“Why?”

“Because that is...”

That’s the underground maze that even an experienced treasure hunter trembles to think of. It’s not somewhere people like us, who are unfamiliar with the maze, can simply enter and come out in one piece.

“But if we want to escape from Mother’s houjutsu, we can only go deeper underground where the power of the gods cannot reach... We have to dive somewhere deeper in.”

“What did you say?”

Mother's houjutsu?

"So you're saying that the person controlling these zombies, is your mother!? Wait a sec, there are houjutsu like this as well... W-what a disgusting hobby—"

Although she has abdicated, but she was once the ruler of a country. Judging from the bloodline of Saralegui and Yelshi's mother, she must be an elegant, strong and beautiful Empress, who would have thought she's secretly a zombie control expert. As a result, the image of an Empress in my heart, once more crashes apart.

"E-even so we can't simply enter the maze, do you want to get lost and die in the maze!?"

"We're just hiding inside for a while, Yuuri. Just until Mother can't sense our presence anymore and gives up the attack."

"Why do you... So you're saying that your mom's target isn't us, but you?"

Just because he was born without houryoku, his relationship with his own mother is this bad? But that's their family business. Right now the most important thing is still to get out of our current mess.

"It's no use even if you want to stop me, I still want to go in."

"No, Sara, I can't let you go in alone."

His expression pained, Saralegui takes another half step back, his body almost swallowed whole by the darkness. I have to figure out a way to make him give up, if I let him go on his own and something happen , then that'll be bad.

If the king of the powerful Shou Shimaron dies in a mission with us, there will definitely be a serious international conflict. This isn't something an apology can fix.

"Young Master, Young Master, I suddenly think what that puppet is saying isn't half bad!"

"What are you saying, Josak?"

"I think there's nothing wrong with hiding out for a bit, we just have to hide until these things back off."

Maybe it's because of the difference in their level of trust for Hazel, so the two soldiers have different opinions. Josak takes one step at a time, slowly approaching the wall we're at.

"Yuuri, if you want to escape those things, your only choice is to run underground, y'know."

"But that's really dangerous! He doesn't have a torch either, how can one person..."

Saralegui suddenly pulls my hand. And at the last possible second, Josak blocks off an enemy attack from the right. In order to avoid the attack, I lose my balance and fall into the darkness from the left.

It's a very strange area inside.

It's obviously connected to the room with the red wall drawings, but it feels like a different world altogether. It feels just like passing through a tunnel or standing in an ascending elevator, when your ears and throat feel stuffy, and you can't hear sounds too clearly. When I crossed that borderline, the scenes in the room look like a TV show on a square screen.

Surprisingly surreal.

"I still think this place isn't too..."

Just as I'm ready to walk back out, the wall starts moving with what sounds like the noise made by an earthquake. Still in front of the borderline, Josak turns around immediately, holding his breath as he watches the entrance start to close. Although I want to pull Saralegui back into the room, there's an unexpected force preventing us from going back. The same thought flashes through my mind, "I can't leave him alone here".

"Young Master!?"

Having noticed that I can't move, Josak rushes in at the last moment. If he were a second slower, he may not have been able to make it.

Through the slit that a person can't pass through anymore, I see Conrad dashing over here. When I want to yell his name, I realize that there's danger behind him.

“Behind you!”

Lord Weller turns around and uses the hilt of his sword to block the heavy blade swung his way, and sparks fly everywhere.

“Conrad! What to do, there are still so many of those things!”

“I’ll be fine!”

He turns his head back a little, but has no choice but to face the enemy immediately. From what I can see through the slit alone, there are around 10 more corpses that can fight.

“You guys go on, I’ll be fine.”

“But...”

Conrad speaks before the entrance closes up completely, his voice coming through the slit.

“For sure...”

The wall makes a sound like the city doors closing, and seals up completely. The red light from the fire and the wall drawing which illuminated the whole room doesn’t penetrate the darkness at all. The only source of light here is the torch in my hand.

It’s a light that gives no sense of security whatsoever.

Saralegui mumbles,

“It’s no use, we had better go forward and look for another exit,”

“How can it be no use!”

Josak and I try to push the wall with all our strength again, but no matter what method we use, the stuck stone just won’t budge, and we can’t hear even a sound from outside. It’s as though there was never any mechanism there, no cracks or bulges.

When there’s nothing more we can do, I finally say those terrifying words,

“Are we trapped in here...?”

No, we’re not trapped, we’ve been swallowed.

I can even say this darkness has long ago been waiting for us.

References

1. ↑ Reference to movie '28 Days Later'
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/28_Days_Later)
2. ↑ Reference to the idea of “video games have an adverse effect on the brain” in Professor Akio Mori’s bestseller, “The Fear of Game Brain”. Many neurologists feel this theory has no scientific proof, raising many debates.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akio_Mori)

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

At least a part of what Hazel said is true.

Because the underground isn't just tunnels, neither is it completely a maze. On one side of the path is a wall reinforced with stones, while the other side has little rooms that look like residences at regular distances from each other. One is even a house with old pans and other simple items, proof that people lived here once.

A few hundred years ago, this was indeed a city.

And it was a large, unknown underground city.

"Although I heard that there are ruins underground, I never thought they would be this large in scale."

After walking for around an hour, Saralegui seems to sigh with emotion. In contrast to me now, his condition is much better than it was a while ago. He handed the only torch to us, and is walking at a distance from us. It's amazing how he can walk so steadily without a torch.

Of course, he hasn't forgotten to walk with his right hand on the wall. If he didn't do that much, he would be a lot worse off.

Walking in an uninhabited cave or tunnel without touching the wall, is a very dangerous thing to do. If you got lost in the bottomless darkness of the square, you wouldn't even know which way to walk. For all you know, the next step forward is a ravine, or the side a cliff.

But the underground is a lot warmer than the surface, so we didn't make much use of the thick jackets we have in place of sleeping bags. Ahead of us, Saralegui looks perfectly fine in his summer clothes.

"Hey—Didn't I say that it's really dangerous to walk in front on your own?"

"Relax, Yuuri, I'll be fine. This is much better than fighting those rotting corpses."

I think no one likes being attacked by the undead.

Looking at Saralegui's happily hopping back, I punch Josak's upper arm once with my fist. Because the exceptional spy has not been himself the entire time, continuously wallowing in regret.

"If that time I hadn't rushed in, and had pulled the two of you out instead..."

"What are you saying? If you hadn't followed us in, the two of us would be completely nerve-wrecked by now!"

And even if he wanted to pull us back, there was no time and space for both Saralegui and I to pass. If he tried to pull us out by force, chances are high one of us would have gotten stuck. Since I can't be at ease leaving Sara on his own, then Josak following us is the best decision we could have made.

"But there's still good news, Gurrier."

"What—"

"According to Hazel, this underground tunnel seems to head north. So as long as we don't go off track, we should be going against the path she took to get here. That way we can head for the royal tombs or the facility where Jason and Freddy are kept. However..."

Even as I say that I feel I'm being too optimistic, so I add self-condescendingly,

"We'll have to see if everything goes so smoothly."

"It will."

Here's to hoping.

And I hope we don't encounter those terrifying things Hazel was talking about. How terrifying must it be to make the woman that is courage incarnate, Hazel Graves, so scared? Is it the darkness? Or monsters? Or maybe illusions?

How I envy Josak, who couldn't understand what she was talking about back then.

Once my attention leaves that topic, my mouth unconsciously mentions the name I'm extremely worried for.

"I wonder, is Conrad all right?"

"Since he said it himself he'll be fine, then there shouldn't be a problem."

The spy shakes the hand that isn't holding the torch, relaxing his shoulder muscles as he replies,

"If he was forcing himself, he would definitely give you a huge smile, y'know. Especially when it comes to you, this attitude of his is even more noticeable."

"You say he'll reply with a smile, really?"

"Really."

Then I should better believe his words, words spoken by the childhood friend who went through thick and thin with him.

"The Young Master is gentle to everyone, so I understand your pain. But don't be deceived by how we look, we have survived many battles to make it to today, y'know. So we're really lucky, and we won't just kick the bucket that easily. Especially Captain, if he were to die in a battle with the enemy, who knows how the next generations will laugh at him, so he would fight even harder. Besides, he's only up against ten fermenting bodies, to Lord Weller, that's like the second cup of red tea in the afternoon."

"Urgh~~"

You mean lemon tea left for a few days. Since Josak, who knows Conrad's strength better than anyone else, said that, then ten or twenty of those resurrected group should be nothing.

Maybe the fact that a weakling like me is worrying about him is an insult in itself.

Josak raises his head carelessly, and then shrugs his shoulders,

"There's another trench. Watch your step, we already passed two since just now."

"Mn."

Up until now, we have indeed passed two identical trenches. The wall underneath our fingers sinks in a little there as well, so we can detect them immediately.

Although we call them bumps, they are actually ancient fences. Under the not-so-bright firelight, we can see a stone slab about 50cm thick above us. The heavy stone will fall under a certain condition, sealing up the tunnel. It's something like a floodgate in modern times.

Since it's that thick and heavy, it can probably block a rush of water and sand. But right now I can't feel any hint of underground water at all, and ahead of us is an endless, gentle slope. At this angle, even if there are falling rocks and soil, it won't become a landslide. If it's not to stop water or debris, then what kind of threat would need such a large slab of stone to stop.

I shudder once in spite of myself.

"If you're squashed by that kind of stone, that's an instant 'bye-bye'."

"Probably."

Saralegui's happily hopping back ahead of us, is swaying like a ghost in the dead of the night. Although his clothes are pale green, but under the illumination of a single, not very reassuring torch, all we can see is a blur figure of white.

"...Why is he in such good spirits?"

"Maybe it's because he got rid of the thorn in his side."

"By the 'thorn in his side', you mean... Conrad?"

Gurrier nods three times in succession.

"How could Conrad be the thorn in his side? Doesn't Sara really like Conrad? Like when we were on the boat, he was even bossing him around... No —I meant, didn't he keep Conrad by his side at all times?"

"Ah, so you saw that after all?"

"Not only did I see that, I even saw that time when he didn't care at all what others thought, and used him as a living clothes rack. And I was thinking, maybe it's because that guy is an only child, that's why he was so happy to have an older brother, so I was happily watching from the side. You know, that time... We were all so sure that Saralegui was an only child, we had no doubts whatsoever."

After saying that, I sigh deeply, covering half of my face with my free left hand,

"...Am I too quick to trust others?"

Although there's no breeze, the flame is dancing. Above me, Josak retorts, "Why are you saying this all of a sudden?"

"My brain may be worse than other people's, Josak. Otherwise why would I make the same mistake over and over again?"

"I asked you, why are you saying this all of a sudden?"

"It's the same with Sara."

My right hand is heating up from rubbing against the wall too much. Although the stones and soil are as cold as ice, but the fingers touching the wall feel hot from the friction. It's a bit like that numbing feeling from holding ice tightly.

"The first time we met was in the bath, right? Weren't you there too, Gurrier? If only I was a bit more observant, and saw Sara for the type of person he was, we wouldn't have to be here now! If only I could activate my self-defense instincts, I would have known that whatever that guy says cannot be trusted."

"You couldn't have helped it, after all back then you were bathing with the sheep, right? So of course your heart would have been a-flutter, it's not something you could control."

He can use his feminine voice to comfort me, only this time I can't cheer up. It's all because I keep making the same mistakes, getting myself in trouble over my stubbornness. Not only me, even my most important comrades are in danger because of me.

I really, truly feel that I'm a useless Maou. Vaguely I remember a saying, "people with a foolish king are unfortunate".

"Even if you say that, Young Master..."

The unfortunate minister representative—His Majesty the Maou's Spy 0043, points his finger onto the top of my head,

"Up until now, when Your Majesty believes in someone and takes what seems to be rash and selfish action, has it ever ended badly?"

My mind starts listing out everything that has happened since I was first flushed down the toilet into Shin Makoku. The capital, Van dar Via, Sverera,

Hildyard, Caloria, Shimaron.

"...I think there should be a lot more. In places I'm not aware of, a lot more things should have happened."

And then comes Seisakoku.

"I feel as though this is all because everyone protected me, otherwise considering that I didn't even have time to practice before I was hastily put on the throne, there's no way my position could be so stable until now."

"Mmhaheiahaa—"

Josak suddenly makes a strange sound that sounds like a sigh but isn't a sigh. If it wasn't for the fact that he has to touch the wall and hold the torch, I think he would have raise his arms and shouted into the sky.

"Gurrier, what's the matter!?"

"I'm really so useless, eh. That's why, His Excellency doesn't want to summon me back to the country, and keeps me as an international employee only good for running errands--!"

What's wrong, is he not happy with his current job? My hand leaves the wall to grab the spy's clothes.

"You're not happy with your current work environment? And I thought you enjoyed it! If so, you should have said so earlier, I'll tell Gwendal subtly, I'll definitely use plenty of subtlety."

"It's not what you're thinking, Your Majesty. Actually, me, I'm trying desperately to comfort dejected old you, y'know!"

He points at Saralegui ahead of us with his chin, and even says in a purposely loud voice,

"Setting Captain's absence aside, there's really no need for you to worry about that kind of guy."

He actually dared to call the Shou Shimaron boy king 'that kind of guy', as expected of the unbeatable Gurrier.

"But no matter how I try to comfort you, it's no use at all! Mmhaheiahaa—

Looks like, I really am a useless soldier, huh~ If it was Lord Weller, right now he would brilliantly use one line and his strange smile to solve this, right~~ Ah, is this not strange enough?”

The image of Conrad tying the sack tightly appears in my mind.

“Recently he can be quite mean sometimes, too.”

“Exactly—”

Gurrier frowns, his head cocked almost all the way to his shoulders, and then he uses the left hand with the torch to wipe his forehead. It seems to me that his hair is moments away from being burned by the flames.

“That black-hearted man’s words can comfort you, while I, pure white and innocent Gurrier, no matter how I try... Maybe it’s because I’m no good with my words or my smile is too normal, so I can’t get Your Majesty’s spirits up no matter what. What a useless soldier I am, huh.”

“I—told—you—You’re not useless!”

“And besides—”

Josak’s hand leaves the wall, his calloused fingers messing up his orange hair.

“It’s my fault too, that that important Lord Weller isn’t here.”

“Eh, Josak’s fault? Why, did you guys fight?”

“What are you two talking about--? If it’s anything interesting, I want to listen too—”

Saralegui waves at us, all carefree. Why can he continue moving forward even without a torch? So unlike me, scared of the dark.

Josak bends down, pretending to scrutinize my complexion, his eyes staring straight at me. Those eyes, bluer than I expected, reveal a lot of anticipation and some regret,

“...I talked that hesitant^[1] man.”

I ask back in reflex, “What did you talk to him about?”

“I told him to think carefully on what he really wanted. I said that, and I even told him not to simply approach you until he comes to a conclusion.”

My mind is still stuck on ‘What did you talk to him about?’ Recently, this brain of mine that has started using English a lot often reacts directly to how ‘SVOC’^[2] is arranged.

“I asked him, ‘Which side are you choosing?’”

“Aah, you’re talking about Conrad?”

I finally get it.

In other words, he forced Lord Weller to decide between Dai Shimaron and Shin Makoku. Maybe he even told him not to get too close to me until he decided which nationality he wanted, or something like that? Both of them have human and mazoku parents, so maybe it’s easier for them to communicate.

But, even if you force him to say ‘which one of these will you choose as your hometown’, it’s probably not that easy to cut off the ties.

“And at the end he actually sulked. That bastard, he really did refuse to approach us.”

“No way, he can’t be sulking, can he? I mean, there’s no need for him to sulk over such a small thing, is there?”

He’s already an adult of over a hundred years old, how could he sulk over a small thing like that? I refuse to believe it, but at the same time I imagine Conrad crouching on the ground and drawing circles. Finally I can’t help but laugh out loud.

“That’s why Gurrier ended up being the one with you. So sorry, Young Master.”

“What are you saying, Josak gives me a feeling of security as well, y’know! And the ultimate transformation techniques you use at the critical moments, are always a sight for sore eyes!”

“That’s exactly right, I love Your Majesty the most~~”

I don’t hesitate to punch his back, and he doesn’t hold back when he forcefully rubs my neck. Although it’s nice to see him smile, he sure is using a lot of strength there, I wish he would control it a bit. Although the two of us are exchanging friendly banter at the back, Saralegui doesn’t seem to care in his

happy mood, until he turns around suddenly and says with certainty,

“It seems to be something alive there.”

Even though he’s been leading the way since we started the downhill slope, this time he’s looking back. And he’s even looking beyond our shoulders, at something even further behind us.

“Hey... Don’t do this, Sara—if you tell me there’s something on my shoulder, from tonight onwards I won’t dare to go to the toilet on my own.”

“Really—Young Master is being too polite. If you don’t mind, Gurrier can accompany you to the toilet anytime!”

“I don’t want a stalker like you who most likely will peep at me accompanying me to the toilet—”

Saralegui’s completely taken aback by our conversation. Right now, his expression really is very cute.

“Accompany? No, Yuuri, I’m not talking about accompaniment here. I saw something alive behind your shoulders, in other words higher up the slope we just passed.”

“You can see so far!?”

And the surroundings are so dark, too. Basically Josak and I are taking turns holding the torch, so Saralegui has basically no light to show the way. Even so, he can detect something alive and moving in the distance.

“Sara, are your eyes really good?”

The person in question smiles gently, like a flowing cloud, and then caresses his long eyelashes with his middle and index fingers,

“Didn’t I say so before, Yuuri? My eyes may be such a bright gold, but they can’t stand heat and light. Especially sunlight.”

I know that. The reason he wore glasses, isn’t because of his eyesight, but to protect his eyes. Even now, I still occasionally think those thin colored glasses really do suit him very well.

“That’s why my eyesight is very good in the darkness instead, because there’s

nothing blinding me. Even if I suddenly enter total darkness, it's only a little blur in the beginning, but I can get used to it immediately. No light is actually easier for me."

"Eh, get used to... Don't tell me you can see?"

"Yeah, I can? Can't everyone see after a period of time?"

"Normal people can't see--!"

"Really?"

His expression of disbelief leaves a normal person like me at a loss.

So that means that the door to his memories is open now, too? Ohh~~ No wonder he turns off the light when everyone is asleep. No, wait, does he sleep because the lights are off? Turns off the lights so he can sleep? I mumble away, saying the interesting things above.

"This counts as a super convenient power, doesn't it? Although you say you were exiled from the country for not having houryoku, I feel this is a really cool houjutsu."

At least this is more special than Ajira's translation houjutsu. I always feel that that's definitely the product of hard work. Saralegui, who doesn't understand the pain of those hard-working types, presses a pretty finger to his lips,

"Is that so? Even though there's a difference in degree, I always thought everyone could see."

I hate geniuses who can compete with others on talent alone the most. But instead of hate, I should say I envy them.

Underneath the gentle torchlight, Saralegui narrows his eyes and smiles like an angel,

"But still~~ I don't have any hopes for houjutsu anymore, Yuuri. Even without the power bestowed by the gods, humans are still unbeatable. Even if I'm not grateful to the gods, I can still rule a country, and get whatever I want."

I put one hand into my pocket, my right touching the wall, and mutter with a sigh,

“...If I heard that a month ago, I would have been so touched.”

Now that I know what your true colors are like, I won’t find your words cool anymore. Sure, you need power to rule a country, but the reason you can get whatever you want, is actually because of your unscrupulous methods, isn’t it.

“What I’m concerned about is the ‘living thing’ you’re talking about.”

Josak stretches his arm, trying to illuminate as much behind us as he can.

“In this underground with no apparent food source, are there really large living things that the eyes can’t see? Or are those corpses right on our heels?”

“Those inhuman soldiers can’t reach this area, because Mother’s power can’t reach so deep underground.”

“What on earth is your mom trying to do? Why would she send zombies to kill her own son?”

“I don’t know why, either.”

He uses an unbelievably cold tone to say his own mother’s name,

“The Empress Alazon, probably wishes me dead, huh? Or maybe she’s scared I’ll manipulate Yelshi, and claim Seisakoku as my own.”

“Even so... There’s no need to kill you, is there?”

“That’s what she’s like, extremely obsessed over power.”

“Impressive, just like a puppet.”

Josak says that with a tone of contempt. Perhaps feeling insulted, Saralegui raises his head and looks at the man so much taller than his with a severe gaze.

“Who do you mean by ‘puppet’?”

“You, of course, Shou Shimaron king.”

“Me?”

Before I can intervene, the two of them have ignited ice cold sparks. His entire face red with anger, Sara deliberately suppresses his emotions,

“Which part of me is like a puppet to you?”

“Mn—Appearance, actions, the way you can’t escape your mother’s grasp...

Once you add it up, all of you, I guess.”

“I have escaped Mother’s grasp!”

“Sorry, sorry, then should I say you want to use the underground as your puppet, and be the puppeteer that controls the country?”

“All right, all right.”

I feel as though it’s pitiful for Saralegui to be called a puppet, so I raise my hands and step in between the warring parties. The three of us are really different in body size.



"Please, can you guys not argue in a dangerous situation like this? Our luck on

this journey has been bad enough. And don't you think it's strange? Gurrier and Sara, your relationship shouldn't be this bad. Normally, you guys can't sustain a conversation beyond a few lines, right? So what's this now? It feels like you've disliked each other since a long time ago. Why are you suddenly like this? Could it be that while I was unaware, we sucked in some poisonous gases that will trigger your fighting instinct... What sound is that?"

Just like a television with a finger holding down the volume up button, the seismic noises and slight tremors are rapidly approaching us, and the sound is getting louder. There's a sound like tiny claws on the ground, and high-pitched squeaks that tense up every nerve in your body. What looks like a grey wool carpet is sweeping towards our direction.

Tens of thousands of rats are slowly moving down the slope.

"This!? This is the living thing Sara saw!? Goodness, they're rats! I'm terrified of rats!" "Calm down, Young Master. Pretend to be a rock, quickly pretend to be a rock and wait it out!"

I raise my hands and present a banzai pose, shutting my eyes tightly and leaning on the wall. Pretend to be a rock, pretend to a rock... One, two, mn—I can't eat anymore. Crap, this is Bancho Sarayashiki^[3].

"If you're bitten by these things, you'll either get the plague or end up like the cat-shaped robot, or you'll get sent to Maihama^[4], so it's one out of three!? Gurrier doesn't know about the terror Doraemon had to go through^[5], that's why he's so carefree. Waa—they're on my legs, they're on my legs--!"

"What'll I do with you~~ Since you're so scared, I'll lift you up in a princess carry."

"...Never mind, thanks for the offer."

I grew up in the sports field next to the river and I'm this scared, so Saralegui who was raised in the palace must be even more terrified. I look beside me, but not only has he turned his face this way calmly, he's even staring at something higher up the slope. He doesn't seem to care the slightest about the swarm of rats by his feet either.

Soon after he raises his hand up high, as though challenging an invisible person

who isn't there, and then he reaches out his fair, slender hands, pointing at something that looks to me like an empty spot in the darkness. Even underground, those golden eyes are still sparkling. He looks like an angel declaring the death of a human, or maybe a demon.

Those eyes that can see through the dark, can they see other things as well?

References

1. ↑ The word here is sort of unsure, not clean-cut, not straightforward.
2. ↑ In English: Subject, Verb, Object, Complement
3. ↑ A Japanese ghost story, specifically that of Okiku who has to keep counting plates after her death.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banch%C5%8D_Sarayashiki)
4. ↑ Where there's Tokyo Disneyland and its mascot, Mickey Mouse xD
5. ↑ The ears of Doraemon were eaten by a mouse.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

To find that white-haired woman who is small in size and runs about everywhere, he ran through all the markets that morning.

Out of the activity bases he heard of yesterday, this is the last. His whole heart is filled with a prayer, “You have to be here.” Whenever he sees a combination of a cart and an old lady, he will start staring at her face without hesitation. And yet he just has to make so many mistakes, now of all times.

Just as the market is about to end nearing noon, he finally finds the target he was looking for. A slightly comforting shadow flits past those foreign brown eyes.

“Hazel!”

“Oh dear!”

Hazel Graves puts down her cart, panting, and replies in simple English to the person she recognized,

“Morning, did you sleep well yesterday?”

“Not really. I thank you ahead for your concern, but there was an unexpected turn of events.”

“Unexpected...? What’s the matter, Weller, you’re all out of breath. And...”

An ominous feeling sneaks up on her suddenly, and so she peeks behind Conrad—there’s not even a shadow there.

“Where’s Little Buddy and the others?”

The mazoku guard hesitates a little, but quickly recovers.

“Yesterday night, we were attacked by strange creatures—the undead. There seems to be a houjutsu that can control those things in this country.”

“A houjutsu to control corpses, you say? What on earth is this? That’s blasphemy to God and the dead!”

"Hazel, I think you might be the only person to think that way here. Chalk it up to religious differences. And the mastermind behind those corpses seems to be His Majesty the Emperor's mother."

"Alazon? She was definitely a cold and cruel Empress, but I never thought she could use some terrifying houjutsu."

Conrad waves all that away as unimportant with his right hand, hurriedly entering the main point from their discussion about the enemy.

"To me, though, the important thing is that my master entered the other side of wall."

"What did you say!? The other side of the wall!?"

Hazel Graves is stunned into silence for a moment, but as expected of a veteran adventurer, she immediately recovers. Still, she can't help but interrogate Lord Weller,

"I told you again and again and again, how... how did you let him run inside? Does he want the treasures in the tombs that badly? Wasn't your mission saving those twins? If so you should have gone from the surface, unless your true motive was to hide from the guardians and quietly approach the tombs... But the problem is that child doesn't seem like that kind of person!"

"Treasures? Such a misunderstanding would be very troubling to us. His Majesty never even considered getting those things. It's just that one of his companions^[1] was shocked into darting inside, and he can't just leave that person there, hence he followed that person inside."

"By companion do you mean that one? That orange-haired one."

Standing in front of a silent Conrad, Hazel Graves twitches one eyebrow ever so slightly, then says, raising her chin,

"Fine, looks like there are still a ton of things you need to explain. On that note, you're here, so why isn't the Little Buddy you're supposed to protect here? Aren't you a bodyguard, Weller? Don't tell me you just let that child run in by himself?"

Conrad looks as though just breathing is torture, frowning as he shakes his

head,

“He’s not by himself, there’s a man more reliable than me by his side. However...”

Whether or not his expression is full of regret and hurt, it has nothing to do with Hazel. She says without holding back at all,

“If you can show this kind of expression, you shouldn’t have left someone else to protect him in the first place!”

And so his expression becomes even more pained, his fist gripped tightly and pressed on his sword sheath. If you look closely, you could even see the slivers of flesh and splashes of rotting liquid.

“I thought I could catch up with them immediately, but the entrance wouldn’t even budge after it was sealed. Hazel, please tell me: How do I open that wall? What must I do to catch up with His Majesty?”

The old lady crosses her arms in front of her chest as she listens to him, soon after calling out to a slave she knows nearby,

“Come over here and help me pull this cart.”

“What’s up? Grandma, anyone who leaves of their own accord will be punished. I don’t want to be whipped!”

“Shut up. Show some manliness once in a while, coward! As long as you don’t say anything, no one will realize I’m gone.”

Hazel knocks the man’s shoulder lightly, wearing a creepy smile you don’t see on old grandmas.

“Or is your heart just like a little female bird hiding and trembling in the hay? Alright, young man, let’s go. Sorry for making you wait, all thanks to that sissy.”

Then she walks in the direction opposite to yesterday, saying in English with her voice kept low,

“I don’t know how to open the walls either, I stumbled across it by coincidence last time. No matter how much time you spend trying to find your way in, it will all be for nothing, because we can’t catch up with them anymore. It’d be faster if we take the surface route and wait for them there.”

"Wait for them there?"

"That's right. Didn't I tell you that the underground city seems to head towards somewhere? If we're lucky, we may be able to intercept them if we go ahead to one of the caves along the way and wait. You have to leave the capital anyway, so do you want to give it a shot?"

"Of course."

As Hazel stares at Conrad's face, trying to gauge exactly how serious he is, she notices the scar on his right eyebrow. Suddenly, she remembers something she heard about mazoku ages once upon a time.

"I heard that you can't tell a mazoku's age from their appearances. Could you be older than me?"

Perhaps surprised at the sudden question, Conrad raises the scarred right eyebrow. Graves pats his arm with a wrinkly hand,

"But for some reason, Conrad, when I stand in front of you, I keep feeling as though I'm talking to my son or grandson. Isn't that such a strange feeling?"

With that, she narrows her hazel-colored eyes and laughs from deep within her throat,

"Problem is, I don't have any sons or grandsons."

We're scared stiff by the 'Lemmings'[\[2\]](#), trying to get past the tunnel before the next wave hits us.

"How should I put it, at least they're not huge."

"Exactly. If they were huge then they wouldn't be cute anymore."

"They're not cute to start with, okay?"

"Are a lot of things huge in Shin Makoku?"

We've been walking for half a day since we came here from the red room, and even though we've only moved a small distance, the scenery in the underground city has changed considerably. Compared to before, the streets are practically straight now. The width and height are constant, too.

If the area around the entrance was a manmade farming village, then this area

would be like a modern high-speed freeway. Although there aren't any high-speed cars, that's true.

Since we can easily touch the walls on either sides now, there's no need to burn our hands with the friction. I hold the torch in my right hand, leaving the other hand empty to press against my chest through my clothes.

Maybe it's my own body temperature radiating into it, but the maseki has had a strange sort of warmth since just now. Sometimes it's so hot it makes me frown, sometimes it's so cold it's as though I'm standing outside.

Although there aren't any houjutsu users nearby, this is still shinzoku land, filled with houryoku. If I threw the maseki into the opposing power, surely it would cause some sort of disturbance.

On the other hand, the pale pink ring Saralegui put on my finger has not budged at all, acting like a normal stone. Apparently it's a precious houseki that can only be mined in Seisakoku, and yet it hasn't reacted in the slightest. Of course I'm relieved that I don't feel any more pain, but the fact that the ring which caused me so much pain back then is so quiet now, gives me a sense of apprehension too.

Since it's a shiznzoku treasure, it should be more excited, emitting more beautiful colors now that it's back in the homeland it missed so much.

"...Whatever, it is a stone after all."

Speaking of stones, there are still a lot of trenches.

Maybe it's because the tunnels got wider, the stone slabs that act as floodgates are even larger. The difference is that now there are a lot of things that feel like switches on the walls too. If we move those, can we control the floodgates? But if they're not used to block the rat swarms, what are they supposed to block? My suspicions intensify.

Or could it be that those slaves who were forced into a corner by their class differences needed large scale defenses in the city they lived in? It's just that from what remained of their possessions in their houses, we really can't tell if the people who lived here were wealthy or otherwise. And besides, if they had the time and effort to make these fort-like structures, they probably wouldn't

willingly bend their knees and serve others.

The more I think about it, the weirder it gets.

I turn around slowly, unwilling to waste any more brainpower of these meaningless deductions. Forget it, right now I should worry about how long this precious torch can last. It has served as our only source of light since dawn, and now is so short that I can feel the heat of the flame on my hand when I hold it. That's why we must find a replacement before the flame disappears. Pots and pans won't do, so it looks like we'll just have to burn things like clothing.

"Yuuri."

"Don't worry, I will strip like a man... Eh, what did you say?"

Upon hearing Saralegui's voice, I come back to my senses and look at him. Underneath the light of the flame that burns even brighter near the end of its life, those golden eyelashes seem to be sparkling. Can he withstand this level of heat and light?

Ever since we entered this underground city, he seems to be a lot healthier than he was before.

When we first met and when we were travelling on the ship, he was physically healthy but gave people the impression of a pitiable, sickly boy. As soon as we stepped into this underground world, though, his face has gotten more color and his eyes brighter than ever before, and his spirits seem to have reached a new HIGH.

Not only does he still have his vision in the darkness, he noticed the living creatures before we did, so it's hard for us to believe he doesn't know houjutsu.

"Do you hear that? Yuuri, something seems to be approaching us."

"'Something', you say, could it be more rats..."

It wasn't easy, but I can finally hear some noises too. Judging from this deep tremor and impact, it shouldn't be a swarm of small animals. Josak seems to have figured out the truth behind the sound, shoving my shoulder forward forcefully.

"Your Majesty, run!"

"Eh, what?"

"Don't ask so much, just run! Don't turn back!"

By the time I heard him it's already too late, because just as my left foot steps forward, I turn my body around to look. In order to see clearly what it is chasing us down, I waste half a step's worth of time.

In the beginning, underneath the torchlight, all I see is sand and dust. As I'm getting ready to run ahead, I hesitate and look back a second time. Only then do I realize that a large stone, about as wide as the tunnel, is thundering towards us.

Because its edges blur into the darkness, I can't tell if it's round.

"There's no time to look anymore!"

"B-but, what is that thing!? Where did it come from!?"

Saralegui's clothes are floating, touching my nose.

It's the first time I've seen him run. Looks like even a natural born king, when chased into desperation by a large boulder in an underground tunnel, will still deign to start running. And he'll run so fast until even his sleeves and clothes hem start flying too.

I turn around again, confirming that there is no distance between the rolling boulder and the walls, the ceiling... I purposely spent time to confirm this unhappy fact.

Now unless we can find a detour or a crevice to hide in, there's no way we can escape this fate. And this tunnel hasn't had any relief areas up until now. Add that to the fact that we never thought something like this would happen, and we had no choice but to keep on running despite knowing that there wouldn't be any relief areas up ahead to escape into.

It's all because we never thought about this, that's why we practically dug our own graves.

At first we were even secretly glad that we entered an area that looked like a high-speed expressway, when in fact this was nothing to be happy about at all. Because the thing coming at us at high speeds isn't a person or a car, but a huge

boulder as large as the tunnel.

"I think I saw something like this in a movie before! That series of movies that had Harrison Ford running for his life."

"...This is probably a trap."

"Trap!? Who built it, and to, fight against, whom!?"

I run with everything I have and ask at the same time, so I almost end up biting my tongue. Logically, though, this is the place where those who were hunted by the countries on the surface lived, so why would they put so many traps!?

Suddenly, I think of what Hazel Graces would do in this situation.

Since she's a treasure hunter, even if she came across a dangerous trap, she would probably avoid it as though it was nothing. At this time I think: Who knows how would Hazel and the granddaughter who inherited her legacy, as well as all the adventuring lads and ladies after her, handle this crisis.

An image of a rocket-wielding American even shows up in my mind. At a time like this Japanese don't seem to be up to it.

"Yuuri!"

Saralegui calls out to me, panting. His voice seems to sound really happy, or maybe that's just me.

"How far do you think we have to run?"

"How would I know!"

I yell back instinctively, before suddenly remembering that he has the ability to see in the dark, unlike the two of us who can only rely on the torch."

"Sara, use your night vision to find somewhere we can hide! Like a junction or a hole in the wall or something, anything! As long as we can avoid that boulder!"

"There's nothin' like that at all."

...I shouldn't have asked.

The ball is flying due to its mass and acceleration, way faster than a human can run even with every last ounce of energy in their bodies. Even if this is a very gradual slope, there's no avoiding it.

The impact of the incoming weapon is so close our feet won't even listen to us anymore. If that thing was alive, we would already be close enough to hear it breathing.

Beside me Josak looks at his fingertips(3), and then closes one eye, something you only do when you're resisting pain. And the suddenly, his body tilts towards the right.

"Josak!?"

I wonder if he was hurt somewhere, but it looks like he's just leaning towards the wall.

"Keep running, don't stop!"

Of course I want to keep running, but I can't help but be bothered by Josak saying such a thing all of a sudden, at a time like this, so I slow down just a little.

His expression becomes a little surprised, and to comfort me, he even touches my face with his left palm, and then reveals a completely uncharacteristically happy smile, like in a Nativity painting.

"You gotta keep running, kay, Your Majesty."

But, he stops.

"Josak..."

I don't have time to slow down my run, so I tumble over in a sliding motion, kicking up a lot of dirt underneath my feet before I finally come to a stop. Just as I twist my waist and prepare to turn back, the large stone slate I looked up and saw many times before descends from above. With a sound like rolling thunder it sinks into the ground, thus separating this space into two.

So he pressed the switch on the other side.

"Josak!?"

Just as I press my palms and chest to the slate, there's the loud crash of metal shattering and stone colliding. The impact transmitted from the surface of the stone slab, bounces me away once more.

The torch goes out with a wisp of smoke, having flown from my hands. Even all

the sound has disappeared, as though taken away with the light.

I sit on the ground in the dark, in the same position I was in that moment when I slid, scared to even make a sound. How I wish this was all a dream, so scared I am that a single move would make the dream reality, that I don't dare to move even a finger.

At first I thought that as long as I waited patiently, the stone slab would rise on its own, and he would reappear in front of me, so I didn't even dare to breathe.

But it's nothing but darkness and silence around me, and no matter how I wait nothing happens at all.

After a while, light and quiet footprints on the sand approach me, and a soft voice calls me,

"Yuuri."

Rage instantly rises in my chest. Because he dared to speak, to make a sound, so I almost vented that unreasonable anger on someone else.

But I don't answer, slowly straightening up my body, using my hurting knees to crawl to the newly-formed corner of the wall. In that absolute darkness, I use my hands to advance by touch.

"...Josak?"

I kneel, feeling the smooth stone surface from whatever height I can reach. By the time I touch the lowest point, I reach out my hands to touch the ground, even softer than the wall. I explore the 90 degrees angle with my index finger.

I touch it several times.

After shouting his name once, I can't stand it anymore,

"Why...!"

I start to move, trying to dig up the road made of mud and stones. But it's no more than scratching the surface, no use whatsoever, yet none of that matters. Right now my head is filled with one thought, and that's how to dig a path to the other side of the slab no matter what.

I yell his name without stopping, cursing Josak for not replying.

“Yuuri.”

I don’t notice someone putting his fingers on my shoulder, and I don’t spare a thought as to who it is.

“Are you crying?”

Only then do I sense a living person crouching down beside me, and I finally realize that person is Saralegui. His soft hair touches my face.

In the absolute darkness I can’t tell if my eyes are still open, and cannot possibly know what kind of an expression Sara is looking at me with.

“You’re digging in the wrong place.”

That familiar hand of his, grabs my wrist, and moves it to the left about an arm’s length away.

There’s something slightly damp there.

Saralegui’s fingertips brush past my hand to touch that area, the slightest movement in the air showing me his hand is moving.

Saralegui snorts a little with his nose, touching my left cheek with his damp fingertip.

That’s blood.



References

1. ↑ lit. Someone together on the same journey
2. ↑ A reference to an old game where you try to get the giant anthropomorphized lemmings to the end line.
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lemmings_\(video_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lemmings_(video_game)))

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Moving underground where the sun cannot reach, has me unable to tell what time it is.

I raise my wrist out of habit, wanting to look at the digital analog watch on my hand, before I remember that I left it in the castle. Still, if there isn't enough UV rays, the fluorescent paint on it wouldn't work. I can't even see my own hand, exactly how dark is this place?

Even if I'm in the absolute darkness, I still would care about the time on the surface for a while. Since I don't have a watch to refer to, I can only rely on my level of weariness or hunger, or start counting how many steps I take.

But after a while I slowly stop caring about all those things, I don't even have the desire to rest or eat. Everything has become trivial.

I just keep moving my feet and walking.

The right foot, then the left foot, step with the left foot then the right foot. All my brain wants is to walk carefully and not fall. I have to walk to the end of this tunnel, head to the facility and tombs at the other end of the desert. I'm just being obedient, obeying the things I decided in the past.

And I will always make sure I have one hand on the wall, that's something we must do when feeling our way through the dark.

Suddenly the air stops moving, and I realize that Saralegui, who was walking ahead of me, has vanished. If I lose him in this darkness, what would become of me? He can see in the dark, so he can see his way even without firelight. But without moonlight or sunlight shining inside, I can't see a single thing.

Alone I definitely would not be able to walk out of this tunnel. The road has been straight up until now, but if there's a junction ahead, I might get lost, and end up starving by the roadside. It's just that, compared to my fear of an end like that, right now my heart is filled with nothing but self despair.

I think, "This can't be helped, either."

As for Saralegui, who had vanished ahead of me, he stops now, as though waiting for me to catch up. When that feeling unique to him floats up to me, I hear his familiar voice,

"You really can't see anything, huh."

I nod wordlessly. Even if I don't make a sound, he can probably see me nod.

"It can't be easy for you to walk like this, I'll hold your hand then."

As soon as he says that, he grabs my left hand without waiting for an answer and starts walking ahead briskly.

"I didn't think people really couldn't see in the dark, seems like everyone has been living a pretty inconvenient life. I always thought this was normal, I thought everyone could see. No wonder the lady officials would always call me, who could see even in the darkest place, weird names."

Weird names? Honestly I feel Saralegui should have a different name too.

"So sorry, Yuuri. I'm just not considerate enough with things like this."

He swings our joined hands like a child, adjusting his pace so he can walk side by side with me. The way we're walking now is just like a long time ago in kindergarten, how we would walk on long trips out, so I can tell he's in a very good mood.

"I should have done this a long time ago."

And I'm just moving my feet, walking. This is the only way to advance, so I move my feet.

"I say, Yuuri, you should have done this a long time ago."

Done this a long time ago? I should have done what?

But I still don't change what I'm doing. Just walking for the sake of it, to find a way out of this tunnel. I want to find the facility those two children are in, and head for the emperors' tombs. I want to follow the decisions I made in the past, because back then I still had the ability to decide.

I walk, rest, continue to walk.

And I thought that a journey like this would be hard on Saralegui, who grew up in the palace, but it turns out neither side made a noise of complaint, and the two of us walked until we couldn't walk anymore together. We slept together, woke up and then started walking again. I don't say a thing and rarely open my mouth, but Saralegui has always been in a good mood. That's something to be grateful for, at least.

On what should be around noon on the third day, Saralegui gasps like a child, "Yuuri, look! The ceiling, the ceiling, there's a hole in the ceiling."

Hearing his words I raise my head. Somewhere really high and really far away, there does seem to be a vague white circle.

"Hole...?"

"That's right. Oh, yeah, you're used to the darkness now, so that's why you suddenly can't see. The ceiling here is really high, a lot like an impluvium in the castle. Oh, yeah, it was always narrow tunnels before, so it feels so much more relaxing to be in a wide open space like this... How is it? Yuuri, are you slowly getting used to the light now?"

I raise my head until my neck even begins to hurt, staring at the white circle with the light coming through too. Since the light is so strong, logically it should be brighter here too, and I should be able to see my own hands and Saralegui's face soon.

"...Yuuri?"

The blur white figure is staring at me. I rub the corners of my eyes with my index fingers, staring at my palm,

"Sara, are my eyes open?"

"Yeah, why?"

"...I can't see your face."

I can sense the light and the shadows created by the light. But that face and these hands, the stones and the ground—

I can't see.

And I don't know whose names I should call.